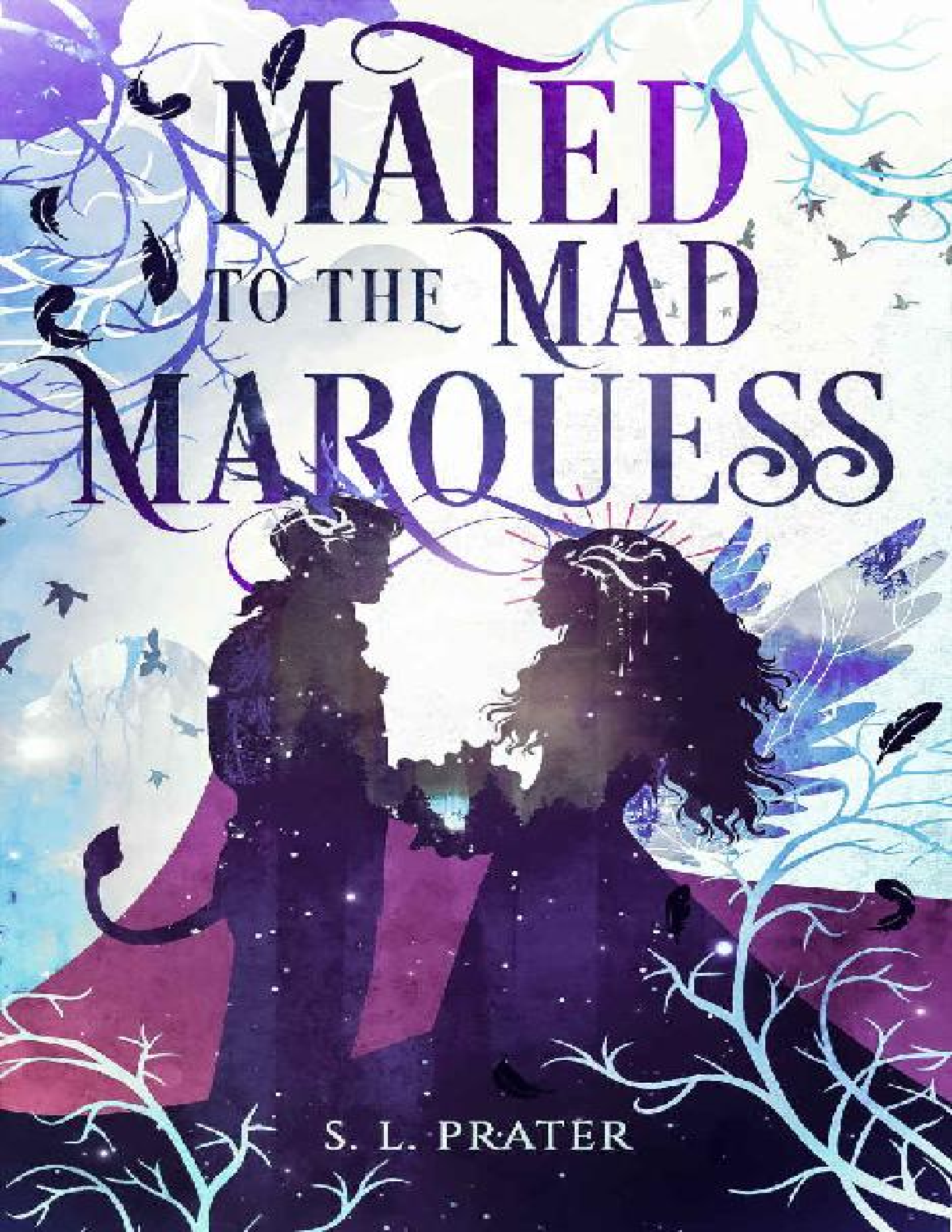




MATED TO THE MAD MARQUESS

S. L. PRATER

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Mated to the Mad Marquess:
Gaslamp Fantasy Romance

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Content Warning

This kissing book is naughty. It was written for an adult audience. Please be advised that it contains some foul language, mild fantasy violence, and numerous open door sexual scenes between consenting partners. Romance is the plot. If you're in the mood for a story about quests and immersive fantasy worlds please look elsewhere. Hurry back when you need a book that's filthy fun. For my more sensitive readers, note this story includes chase play, tail play, shadow play, and anal play. Please take care of yourself.

Chapter 1



Malcolm

Malcolm had gone soft. Or, at some point in the last few centuries, nature had become intentionally vexing.

Humbled by a cloud of irritating gnats and littered in mosquito bites, the Marquess of Reedholm realized with a sigh he'd lost the edge that once made the deep, dark woods feel mysterious and exciting. With a curse, he slapped another buzzing pest off his cravat, certain that he was well on his way to transforming into a fae dandy. Before he knew it, he'd be piercing his pointed ears and adding shiny decorations to the antlers that curved back from his crown, like the fledglings were famous for.

Battling with temperamental horses and then wading through muddy forest was not at all how Malcolm had imagined his day going. He'd hoped it would start out like it usually did with plenty of wine and women to drown his sorrows in, revelry to keep the boredom at bay. Instead, a long meeting with his estate manager had interrupted his breakfast, followed by a list of complaints from his tenants, each just as irksome as the incessant insects.

He couldn't afford to ignore their complaints this time. Not with whispers of revolt coming in from the Baron Dagrún's country estate next

door and a command from the King of Night to keep the peace. Disquiet was a contagious force. Malcolm needed to control the spread.

Obey the king he would, even if it meant tramping through the woods like a lumberman to settle a squabble he wanted no part of between skittish tenant farmers and some fae woman. His pale skin gleamed in the humidity stirred up by late summer air and the rush of the nearby river.

Harrow, one of his land stewards, led him through thick undergrowth, pushing toward the nearest clearing. Malcolm's tail—long and limber with a tuft of black hair on the end like that of a lion's—flicked irritably from side to side. The persistent swarm of gnats rose to avoid the strike, buzzing instead around his tall ears.

"Her home isn't far now, my lord," Harrow said. The man had lined skin that had gone leathery under too much sunlight. "I apologize for the horses."

They'd passed a circle of ancient tombstones earlier. The horses wouldn't travel beyond them.

"Don't stress over the beasts," Malcolm grunted, scratching at the fresh bite on his forearm. "The horses would rather not be here. I can relate."

Malcolm wasn't dressed for the excursion in his brightly colored waistcoat and silk cravat. Harrow had described the outing as light and short, so Malcolm hadn't changed. But if this was a light hike, he'd eat his boots.

"The horses are afraid of *her* too, my lord," Harrow warned with the quiet reverence of a man reciting a prayer. "She's got the entire estate terrified. Humans and beasts alike."

"Scared of one woman?" Malcolm scoffed.

He'd witnessed women like his mother—may she walk the stars in eternal peace—do a great many things. They could command armies. They could rule countries. Slay dragons. Start wars. Bring god-like men—such as his father—to their knees. It wasn't that he doubted a woman could be so remarkable, it was that he knew the minds of mortal men well. Most humans didn't have the wherewithal to fear women as far as he knew, even if she was one who lived in the wilderness outside of the proper society they revered.

"Not just a woman, my lord. I thought you knew, the village whispers about her so." Harrow's plodding steps startled birds out of the trees. He froze in place, eyes lifting skyward. His throat bobbed. Another rustling in the branches overhead followed the first, but this fluttering movement was heavier. Much too large to be the wings of a bird.

"Not just a woman," Malcolm said slowly, suddenly glad he wasn't at home as he too lifted his gaze. Sunlight turned the canopy above an enchanting emerald shade. Shadowy movement caused the branches to bow and crackle. Things had just gotten significantly less tedious. The renewed allure of the deep woods and the promise of mystery sped up his heart.

"A witch," Harrow whispered like the word was something vulgar. He gasped when another disturbance shook the limbs of the oak above them. "P-perhaps I should . . ."

"Stay here," Malcolm agreed, trotting forward. Blood thumped excitedly in his ears.

The marquess followed the vibrating branches, the crack of limbs, and the darkening shadows that were his friends. They guided him farther into the forest. The shadows thickened around him amiably, welcoming him

deeper, and when the tree line parted around a clearing and sunlight broke through, his shadow he called Solis clung to him still, hanging around his neck and shoulders like a smoky cowl.

I want to know this one, Solis said in a small voice only Malcolm could hear, a voice just like his own. A fae of unique heritage, the marquess carried his soul outside his body in his shadow.

“I think I’d like to know this one, too,” Malcolm admitted, an eager smile curling his lips.

After hiking until his boots were covered in dirt and his chest was heaving, the trees revealed a small cottage in the distance surrounded by prominent flagstones carved to resemble archways that led to nothing. The shade Malcolm cast across the grass blackened and elongated, reaching for the strange stones like tendrils. Here the land felt ancient and undisturbed, like he’d traveled back several centuries, back before cravats and clubs, house parties and balls. Before proper society and mortal sensibilities ruled. Back to when the old gods roamed the land.

He caught a glimpse of the woman then, a Winged One, a fae of old, perched in the tree before him. The Vanir, they were called by those who owed their allegiance to the Lunar Court. The infamous stories and the excitement the fae demi-gods inspired rushed at him as she glided from limb to limb, dashing for her home, disappearing and reappearing between the canopies as fast as his heart was beating. All his favorite stories as a fledgling had featured a Vanir hero or heroine.

He followed her, legs pumping, muscles he hadn’t used in such a way for far too long throbbing. In flashes he spotted feathered ebony wings and bronze skin. Three thick black braids, the longest plaits he’d ever seen, swept after her like a cape.

She might as well have been pulled straight from a fairy book, she fit his imaginings so well. His interest tripled.

“Hecit,” he called after her, a greeting in Olden tongue that wished her good health. The pursuit had his blood warming in his veins. Solis darted around him in a tight circle, equally invigorated.

The woman glided into her cottage through an open window. The shutters snapped closed behind her. The forest fell quiet except for a light breeze that stirred silvery white hair into his face, chasing off the incessant gnats. He couldn’t see the woman looking back at him from inside her home, but he felt her gaze. The weight of her eyes made his pulse quicken.

“Hecit sapael,” he tried again.

Her voice reached him as crisp and cool as the wind stirring through the trees. “You speak Olden like a horse.” Her antiquated accent lengthened her vowels.

Malcolm chuckled. “I’m out of practice.”

“Leave now, groseling, and leave unharmed.”

Malcolm frowned at the slur, his feelings mixed. The threat amused him. Being called mortal—or as weak as one—did not. “I’m not human. Look at me.” Standing tall, he made a show of his tail, snapping it side to side.

I’ll show her we’re not weak, Solis insisted. Malcolm raised a hand to calm him.

“I see a groseling before me,” she fired back. “A groseling with twigs in his hair, here to harass me about farmlands he doesn’t own.”

At her slight, laughter bubbled out of him. Instinctively his hand went to the base of the small antlers on his head, evidence of his own Vanir

heritage. "I am fae like you. Vanir like you, and I'm the lord of this land. It and everything on it is mine."

She is on our land. Is she ours? Solis asked suggestively. Malcolm liked the implication but ignored the question.

"Lord?" she said. "No. I've met the lord of this land. He is Vanir. You go now, groseling, before I separate your head from your shoulders."

Malcolm's coloring was much lighter than his father's because his mother had been Seelie from the north. His ears were longer and more pointed, his hair ashen. He grinned at the closed window. Threats and jeers were a language he understood far better than Olden or even Common. Malcolm was a warrior more than five centuries old with no current cause to battle, no reason to work his muscles, no call to sharpen his blade or fire up his blood. He'd been forced by duty to succumb to a gentleman's life with no pressing reason to stop his descent into dandyhood.

Solving the problems of farmers and herdsman made him restless. He craved the battle this Vanir offered him.

Runes were carved into the rocks that flanked the cottage and the surrounding trees, the words faded with age beneath the lichen. He couldn't read the script but recognized most of them as the markings of warriors and symbols for the old gods. His shadow liked the symbols, swooping in closer to shade the stones and explore the runes there.

I want to see this woman, his soul said. *I want to know her.*

"If you wish me to go away, first tell me your name," Malcolm insisted.

Birds and bugs called to each other in the distance in buzzes and chirrups. The forest itself rumbled with secrets, leaving Malcolm feeling like a much younger man, a man who had purpose and vigor.

After a long moment, she spoke. "I tell you and you leave?"

"Yes," he said. "Sic," he added in Olden, which roughly translated to "very yes."

I don't want to leave, Solis protested, swelling up his dark form so that he encompassed the nearest archway.

"I'm called Hrafn," she said, her voice hard. "You stand in the resting place of my clan, dirtying it with the boots of a groseling."

"Raven," he said, and Solis vibrated with excitement.

"That is the way a horse would pronounce it," she said dryly.

"Raven is the best my uncooperative tongue can manage," he admitted, struggling to recreate the subtler consonant sounds and softer vowel. "There's no reason to hide inside, Raven. I mean you no harm, and I wish to see who I'm speaking with."

"You vowed to go," she grumped. "I spoke my name. You leave."

His lips quirked. "And I will leave as was agreed . . . eventually."

Hrafn growled at him, an intimidating sound Malcolm found entirely charming.

The marquess moved in closer beside the next stone arch. It was as tall as he was, antlers included. Nestled on the eastern edge of her cottage, growing in moist, dark earth, was a fragrant herb garden, a rudimentary green house, and several logs spotted in colorful mushrooms.

The shutters flew open, clapping against the sides of the cottage. He heard the whoosh of air moments before the spear struck with a thud, landing inches from the toe of his boot. It sunk far into the earth, burying the steel head, a throw strong enough to impale even an immortal man.

"Well, now you're just flirting with me," he purred.

“Birds take you!” she shouted, venom flavoring the threat, and Malcolm’s heart sang. “Go find a pit of adders to fall into!”

“There aren’t any snakes around here, but—”

“Get. Out.”

“—there are plenty of birds to take me. Hundreds of species of finches alone. Hawks and black birds galore. The hawks took care of the snakes, you see.” Malcolm grasped the spear by its shaft and jerked it out of the earth. Mud flew. “Farmers are always complaining about the birds because they can’t keep the damn things out of their crops. Apparently, they can’t keep you out of them either,” he said, using his thumb to scrape dirt off the tip of the spear. It was recently sharpened, the wood oiled to a shine. He nearly cut himself because his hands were going as soft as the rest of him.

Her face appeared in the open window, and Solis gave out a little cheer that only Malcolm could hear. Black angular brows furrowed over velvety brown eyes and a nose that was small even with her nostrils flared. Winged Ones were short in stature. She’d fit nimbly through a window he’d never be able to squeeze his chest or shoulders into. Her frame was muscular, a warrior’s build.

“The land produces gifts from the divines. Taking of its fruits and vegetables is my right as a protector of these woods,” she said, jaw set. “You go now.”

Malcolm pointed the tip of the spear at her in a taunt. “I think I’ll stay on my own land, inside *my* woods, a bit longer. I’m so enjoying your hospitality.” His tone was sardonic, but he meant his words. There was no place he’d rather stand than there with one of the Vanir.

She rolled her eyes. “Just like a lordling to believe he owns everything.”

“Lordling. Ha.” He hadn’t been called that in centuries. Looking her over more closely, Malcolm took in the top of the handmade clothing he could see over the sill. At the shoulder of her jerkin was a faded emblem burned into the leather, a set of wings over a bed of thorns. “You fought in the great war. For which side? Seelie or Unseelie?”

“Neither.” The sarcasm in her voice was so subtle, he nearly missed it. “I fought for the unicorns,” she teased. “It was my job to gather up all the soft lordlings that didn’t belong on the battlefield and drop them into pits full of snakes. That way the real warriors would not have to listen to them fuss.”

“An illustrious career, no doubt,” Malcolm said, mirth rumbling in his chest. Unicorns still existed in the Unseelie provinces to the south, but the beasts were about as intelligent as the other wild horses in the area. “I take it the war is where you learned to separate heads from shoulders?”

“And rip out hearts,” she said flatly.

“Still beating, of course.”

“They taste better that way.” Her lips quirked.

It had been unnecessary to wonder after he saw the emblem on her jerkin. The image likely represented a connection to the Thornbrush line and the Seelie queen. As a member of the Lunar Court, Malcolm held no allegiance toward either the Seelie or the Unseelie, but it said a lot to him that she chose to fight for a fae court that was at a disadvantage and losing for most of that war. Standing against the Unseelie and a tyrannical dragon king was not the action of a sell-sword. It was the choice of a woman with conviction.

The herbs and mushrooms caught his attention next. Both had been tended to with knowledge and care. “Why not trade with the groselings

instead of taking from them? Those fae herbs aren't anything they've probably ever seen before. Mushrooms are a pain to gather, useful in a deal."

"They won't trade with me," Hrafn said, her tone softening. "They fear me."

She has a point. She is rather terrifying, Solis said in his head. *Of course, that's why I like her.*

"Labor is worth its weight in gode," Malcolm said, trying his hand at an Olden parable.

Hrafn blinked at him. "Worth its weight in . . . goat?"

He barked out a laugh. "Apparently I've forgotten the Olden word for gold."

"The Olden word *is* gold." Her jaw remained set but something gentled in her gaze. She climbed out the window, her great wings folding in around her. Her movements were slow and cautious, allowing the quiet to settle between them.

She landed soundlessly in the grass and rose to full height. Half Seelie, Malcolm wasn't himself very tall, but he had several inches on the winged warrior woman.

"What am I to call you?" she asked, like she was relenting out of common courtesy.

"I prefer Malcolm to groseling, if you can manage it."

"I don't have gold, Malcolm," she said, adding an extra vowel to his name in her antiquated accent. "The farmers scream and run away from me instead of talking. How would I trade my labor for theirs?"

Malcolm hoisted the spear, pointing the tip east. "That way is a small farm village called Reedlet. Vendors meet around the well every morning

to exchange wares. Start there. You can get what you need without trespassing, and then the groselings will leave you in peace.”

She raised a brow at him. “Then will *you* leave me in peace?”

Not a chance, Solis sniggered.

In answer, Malcolm readied the spear and threw it. Hrafn ducked, but she didn’t need to. Even out of practice, his aim was true, his muscles remembering their purpose. The spear struck the window frame just above her head with a loud thwack, embedding itself deep into the wood, a spear throw strong enough to impale an immortal to the wall.

Hrafn rose out of her crouch, the shaft of the weapon still thrumming above her. Her wings flexed, then spread in an impressive display of glossy black he couldn’t interpret. Then her brown eyes crinkled in the corners, gleaming with a light he recognized, confirming her stance wasn’t a threat. He imagined his gaze had looked the same as hers centuries ago, back when he was allowed to give in to his desire for adventure. A need he indulged before his parents died and he was left alone, strapped by duty to an estate he could never abandon.

He saw himself in her.

His heart squeezed in his chest. For a moment the loneliness and boredom that chased him so relentlessly lost its grip. He felt it then, a stirring beside his heart, the blooming bond awakening.

His shadow thickened and darkened. *Mate*, Solis whispered.

“Can’t be,” Malcolm said under his breath, too shocked to fathom what was right before him. He’d been so sure his fate was sealed. All these years, pairs had formed around him. It was common for fae to come across a number of mates in their vast lifetimes, matches with varying potential for great companionship. Once a full bond was thoroughly nurtured, an

irreversible true mate connection formed, a connection he had craved for the majority of his solitary life.

Malcolm was 556 years old, and he'd never met even one with the potential to call to his soul, and it hadn't been for a lack of trying. He frequently kept his bed full of partners.

Now here she was. *Mate*.

Hrafn's chest filled with a deep breath, pulling her jerkin tight, and he wondered if she felt it too. Gods, it was pulsing through him, incessant and unwavering. Solis thickened and solidified into a form that matched the marquess in shape but was wraith-like.

"Stop that," he hissed at his soul.

Mate, Solis hissed back, his black tail flicking side to side eagerly.

Hrafn's eyes widened on the dark form. Gritting his teeth, Malcolm fought to tether Solis to him, but his shadow had never felt so strong before. Solis rarely took solid form. It made him too vulnerable—made them both vulnerable.

"You're scaring her," Malcolm growled quietly, his hands forming fists.

I'm claiming her, he said, *as you should*. His dark steps were lumbering as he stubbornly solidified, slowed by Malcolm's will, a will that was weakening fast because a growing part of him wanted to give in entirely to fae instinct, damn whatever the laws of propriety dictated. Longing pulsed through him and heat built in his chest, overwhelming the rest. Solis vibrated with need.

Hrafn gasped, worry stretching the sound and pitching it high.

"Whatever you do," Malcolm said to her, voice cracking, his mental hold over his shadows slipping, "don't run."

Hrafn's wings tightened around her. She worked her throat, velvety brown eyes taking in Solis and growing big and round. "But what is that?"

"Just don't—"

Hrafn spun on her heels and sprinted for the trees. Pure instinct pumped through Malcolm's veins, polluting his blood, and the last of his brittle control shattered.

Chapter 2



Malcolm

Malcolm ran to catch up, stomping through bramble until his boots were coated in muck, his feet heavy with filth and tired from the pursuit. Sweat dampened his hair. His voice was hoarse from shouting. His words had been useless as of yet, but he gave it another try anyway.

“He won’t hurt you,” he called, jerking at the knot in his cravat and untying it so that silk went limp over his shoulders. “If you’d stop running, I could calm him!”

Don’t stop running, Solis said gleefully.

Hrafn cleared the trees and took flight with one great leap, but Solis had wings of his own. They sprouted from his back, as inky black as the rest of him. Malcolm bounded after them into the clearing, but they were in the air before he could reach either of them.

Hrafn’s wings created a gale, the sound of each heavy flap like the clap of distant thunder. Solis’s wingbeats were silent. He glided toward her, closing the distance with ease like he’d been playing with her all along, and of course his soul had been. This was the game fae instinctively craved, an ancient tradition outlawed by the king for many good reasons.

Reasons he was trying as best he could to remember . . .

Hrafn squawked like an angry bird of prey as Solis's shadowy arms wrapped around her, dragging her toward the earth.

"If you fucking hurt her . . ." Malcolm grunted.

Solis turned them in the air, taking the brunt of the rough landing in a patch of tall grass. Malcolm caught up to them there and found them in a tangled pile of limbs. Solis rose to his feet, hauling Hrafn over his shoulder while she grunted and kicked and wished him dead. Staring at Solis was like looking into a tinted mirror; they shared every attribute. Malcolm's soul seemed pleased with himself, unconcerned by how their mate's feet pedaled, how her angry balled-up fists flew straight through his wraith-like body.

She's strong, Solis said admiringly, a stupid grin on his soot-colored face. Malcolm wanted to slap his smirk right off.

"Let. Her. Go," Malcolm roared, the tether to his soul strengthened by the sight of Hrafn's distress.

Solis pouted at him. *She's supposed to struggle. That's part of the game.*

"This isn't a rutting game." Malcolm's hands balled into fists. "Put her down."

Solis didn't put her down, not immediately. As he lowered her from his shoulder to his arms, Hrafn stopped thrashing. She craned her neck to stare at Malcolm, a line deepening between her brows, her wings drooping off her back in defeat. Long black feathers came free at the ends and swooped toward the earth.

Solis held her out to him, an offering. An extremely tempting one.

"I'm sorry," Malcolm told her as he took her from his soul, and her defiant glare sharpened on his face. He'd meant to set her down

immediately, but she was solid and warm, her braids tangled together behind her in a long train that swept over his arm, her brow gleaming from exertion. Meeting those murderous brown eyes, he felt captured and half certain she could kill him if she had a mind to. He'd rather she didn't, but the knowledge that she could made him want to smile. He repressed the urge.

Best not to encourage his demise.

Another one of her feathers had come loose in the scuffle. Cradling her carefully, he ran a hand down the silken wing and connection shot between them. It reverberated into his palm, then down his arm, leaving his fingers tingling.

Hrafn gasped and grabbed for him, winding both hands into his waistcoat.

"I've got you," he said softly, squeezing her to his chest.

Hrafn's eyes rolled back in her head and her body went limp in his arms.

"Well damn," Malcolm sighed.

* * *

She swooned is all, Solis soothed. Our mate is fine.

"She's not fine," Malcolm grumped, not feeling comforted in the least as he hefted his unconscious mate back in the direction of her homestead. "You scared her half to death, you bastard."

Didn't you see the way she threw that spear at us? She's no spring chicken. She's an ancient Vanir warrior. Hrafn's seen far more frightening things than me.

“You overwhelmed her. This isn’t the first impression I wanted to give my mate.” Malcolm stomped through the underbrush, soggy ground squishing beneath his boots. “She’d find out I was an ass eventually, but I’d prefer she got to see a few of my better attributes first.”

What better attributes? The drinking or the courtesans?

Malcolm groaned at the tree canopies. “Gods, we’re the worst.”

Solis had returned to his usual form but continued to defy the laws of light, floating in front of Malcolm instead of remaining tethered to his person like a proper shadow. *Do you see how strong she is? Her arms and legs feel like they were cut from stone.*

“Shut it,” Malcolm grumbled.

Oh, come on, Solis beckoned. Don’t pretend you didn’t notice. You’re never this boring when it comes to women. We love women.

“Mates should be different.”

Spoil sport.

Malcolm sighed and slowed his pace. He glanced down at the woman in his arms as he stepped carefully over a tangle of tree roots. Sunlight cast her bronze skin in flattering gold. Long thick lashes feathered her cheeks. “I’ve never seen hair so long or so lush. She’s beautiful,” he confessed.

Hair that long, you could tie her to the bed with it. Tie up the rest of her too perhaps if she wanted to play.

The image flooded his mind, Hrafn on her knees on his bed, wrists bound by her long braids, because she asked him to do it—begged him to play like the old gods used to . . . His blood fired. “She’s more beautiful than either of us deserves. We’re bastards for treating her this way.”

Solis let out a roguish cackle. *Might as well keep her then since we're already no good.*

"Don't rutting tempt me," Malcolm snapped. "I'm putting her back before she wakes up and kills us."

And then we come and get her later? Solis said hopefully.

"We give her time to cool off first. Maybe then she won't throw a spear through our heads the moment she sees us."

Solis whooped excitedly, throwing his shadowy fist into the air as the first set of stone archways came into view.

The birds and bugs of the forest fell eerily quiet, and Malcolm slowed to a halt, sensing a disturbance in the nature around them.

Do you smell that? Solis asked.

Malcolm breathed deep, the scent of sulfur—the scent of Hell—filling his nostrils. The sharp cry of a hawk preceded its appearance, darting above them. This bird was too big, too smoky black to be a normal bird.

Demon familiar, Solis warned.

"She really is a witch." Malcolm studied his mate with new eyes. He'd thought Harrow had been making a slur when he called her that before, but Hrafn was in fact an immortal who had given a piece of her soul to another—a witch with a familiar.

The hawk cried at them and spread its wings in an unmistakable threat display.

"I'm putting your mistress back," Malcolm said calmly. "Leave me to it, then I'll go in peace."

The hawk squawked as though dissatisfied with the answer. Solis grew to an intimidating size, twice as tall as Malcolm, a warning the demon

heeded. The hawk kept close as the marquess carried Hrafn toward the cottage, but the demon-bird didn't attack.

Malcolm circled her home, realizing too late that there were no doors, only the shuttered windows her agile body could fit through. As he debated with himself what to do next, Hrafn stirred in his arms. Her familiar called to her, coaxing her awake.

Her lashes fluttered open.

"You're home," Malcolm said.

Hrafn moved with the speed of a striking snake, plucking a short blade from the top of her tall boot and pressing it to his throat, hard enough to draw blood.

Oh, we definitely need to keep this one, Solis cooed.

Malcolm held her gaze with his. He stood motionless as droplets of his blood dripped down his cravat. "I mean you no harm. I'm going to put you down now."

But even as he said it, he stood there holding her, knife at his throat, neck burning. Crimson darkened his cravat, but he was too consumed by the feeling of connection to let her go. The blooming bond thrummed in his chest begging to be nurtured, to be near her, to learn her.

If he put her down, how would he learn her?

Slowly Hrafn lowered the blade. Her eyes bounced from him to his shadow hovering close, not behaving the way shadows should.

Her next strike was twice as swift as the first. She punched Malcolm square in the nose, dropping him to the ground. She hit so hard he lost his wind. Wings fluttering, Hrafn landed on her feet, then she dove through the open window. Her screeching demon-hawk swooped in after her, and the shutters slammed shut.

Dazed on the ground, Malcolm blinked at Solis floating over him, a blurry haze of darkness. *She didn't slit our throat. That's a good sign, right?*

Malcolm rolled in the dirt groaning, certain of two things as blood dripped down his sinuses into his throat: his nose was definitely broken, and he'd never wanted the company of a woman more.

* * *

Malcolm held his cravat to the top of his lip, wiping it clean of blood. Thanks to his unique heritage, his nose had healed too fast and a little crookedly as he made his way back through the woods to the place where he'd left his estate manager behind. He didn't look forward to having his nose reset later. He'd call upon the local tooth-puller. The mortal was known for being a good bonesetter, in addition to handling dentistry.

Malcolm's hand went to the pocket of his waistcoat, patting it.

We kept one of her feathers, Solis said approvingly.

Malcolm stroked it with his thumb, then he took it out to examine it once more. Thick and dark and satiny soft, it reminded him of her lashes as they lay across her cheek.

Smell it, Solis said.

"Are we so sentimental?" Malcolm asked, feeling foolish.

Today we are. It's not every day one happens by a mate, especially not us. Go on. I want to know what it smells like.

Before he could, he heard a rustle in the brambles, and he hurriedly stuffed the plume back into his pocket.

“Harrow . . .?” Malcolm squinted through the trees. “Sacred stars, what happened to you?”

The mortal was naked, covering himself poorly with a branch full of maple leaves. His mud-brown hair stood out in strange patches. He looked like he’d been run over by a herd of wild unicorns, then rolled in the dirt and sat on by a giant.

“W-witchcraft,” Harrow stammered.

“No,” Malcolm said, shaking his head.

“It was,” Harrow insisted. “My lord, I’m not one to wander about with my prick out! The witch of this woods did this to me!”

“No,” Malcolm spat, and Solis grew and darkened behind him, casting a formidable shadow across the ground. Harrow cowered from the display. “She couldn’t have done this to you. She was with us—with me.”

“It was witchcraft, my lord. One moment I was waiting for you, the next thing I know I feel like my skin is on fire, and I’ve stripped off my clothing. I ran in circles through these trees until my feet were bleeding and I was lost. Then the only way to make the burning stop was to break the runes.”

“What runes?” Malcolm demanded. The human blubbered at him, his leathery skin raked in scratches and abrasions. “Just show them to me.”

From the underbrush Harrow pulled free another fallen branch full of leaves and held it behind his back, covering some of his starkly pale ass. He led the marquess east, several yards deeper into the forest.

What remained of the tombstones in the woods near the petulant horses were in pieces and parts.

Harrow’s mouth trembled as he spoke. “I smashed them with smaller rocks until the runes were illegible and the burning finally stopped.” He

held out his hands. The nails were torn and bleeding, his palms swollen and scratched.

Malcolm shook his head. "Harrow, this isn't witchcraft. These are Olden tombstones that you've defiled. Vanir warriors were laid to rest here."

"I'm naked, my lord," Harrow said, his voice pitching high. "A madness the likes of which I'd never felt had taken me! My skin was on fire! If that wasn't magic then—"

"The witch was with me, and she cast no spell," he said firmly, though at that moment he wondered what her familiar had been up to. Such mischief was not beyond a demon with blood magic. "I'll find out what happened here, but I won't have you slander her. Do you hear me? The witch of this wood didn't do this to you."

It was the last thing he needed, more trouble from the tenant farmers. The locals feared her already. At the moment they feared her just enough to keep away, but increasing their distress could turn them from an annoyance into a dangerous mob. People would get hurt.

His mate might get hurt. Solis snarled at the notion.

Harrow's chest heaved on a shaky breath. "The witch didn't do this," he repeated obediently.

"Good man. Now go on. Let's get you home."

Whimpering, Harrow trotted ahead, his branches rustling against his person. When Malcolm was sure the mortal was properly distracted, he pulled the feather back out of his pocket and held it under his bent nose.

Her feather smelled like rich spices, like the yeast in freshly baked bread, leather, and wood oil. She smelled like adventure.

We go back for our Raven soon? Solis pleaded.

“We fix my nose, and then we go back in the morning and try again,”
Malcolm agreed. *No kidnapping this time!* He scolded.

No kidnapping, Solis vowed. *Spoil sport.*

Chapter 3



Hrafn

Leaving her homestead behind was always a challenge for Hrafn. It was the resting place of her clan. A graveyard that had become a cage. Duty held her there despite the blood of the old gods pulsing through her veins, beckoning her to explore far and wide. She didn't dare because her home was also a cage for *it*.

The monster.

It made her blood run cold to think of the ancient bindings failing, so when she left her home, she kept her trips short and she never traveled far. The village of Reedlet felt like a stretch in comparison. She'd be too far away to chase off anyone that came wandering through, but leaving was necessary now. They needed supplies, and it was becoming unsafe to trespass on the neighboring farmers.

Hrafn cut up the last of their flat bread and a lowly little wrinkled tomato and served them to her familiar for an after-breakfast snack, refueling. Flying took a great deal of energy. Ezra, her demon familiar, was understanding about the meager meal—for the most part. He grumbled only a little under his breath. She'd packed light so she'd have more room to carry goods from Reedlet's market.

Ezra pecked at the piece of bread she'd laid out for him in his hawk form. Familiars were tricksters who could magically change their shape, but Ezra had developed a preference for the hawk. They sat on a grassy knoll, the first cottages of the village in sight several yards away.

The piece of soul you gave me feels fixated on the fae we met yesterday, Ezra said, sending her the words through the link made by their magical bargain. *You know the one. The lord with the brittle nose.*

Hrafn shook her fist out. It ached at the reminder. She popped a sliver of shriveled tomato into her mouth and avoided the question, gathering up her pack of fresh mushrooms and her satchel of spices for trade. She remained hopeful the lord had been right about the village's willingness to accept what she had to offer. She needed flour and oil and whatever else they'd spare, but she didn't understand their bargaining system. They favored metal coins over goods.

Ezra took flight and came to perch on her shoulder, the left one where her jerkin was extra padded to protect against his talons. The village was busy. Seeing the humans meandering about, she was once again reminded of how different she was. The women here wore long layered skirts over short boots. They kept their hair pinned up and covered by a bonnet. The men dressed in stiff collared shirts and buckskin breeches. Humans didn't have horns or tails or wings to help differentiate them.

There's just one thing I don't understand, Ezra said, failing to let the earlier matter drop. *If the fae lord wanted you enough to steal you away, why'd he put you back?*

"I don't know," Hrafn groused, but she had a few guesses. She'd fainted like a soft little fledgling instead of a fae nearly nine hundred years

old. Clearly her mate hadn't wanted someone so *delicate*. She frowned, her short, choppy strides turning into a trudge.

She couldn't help fainting. The moment her mate had touched her she'd felt the pull between them strengthen into something so consuming she could hardly breathe.

"It's your fault," she grunted at her familiar.

Mine? He snapped back.

"*Yours*. I put a crack in my soul when I bargained away a piece of it to you. I felt the pain of that crack when he touched me yesterday." But it didn't matter, she reminded herself. She didn't want to be taken by some spoiled lord's son anyway. The man who didn't even have the decency to let her attempt an escape on her own for honor's sake. And he botched her first language—a point she could partially forgive since most of the population had forgotten Olden in place of Common.

Clearly, he either didn't understand Vanir mating habits, or he intentionally ignored the rules. That was unforgivable. How rude of him to arouse her and then insult her so.

"Sidhek," she cursed again under her breath, her chest swelling on a beleaguered breath at the embarrassment of it all. No matter how accustomed she was to Common, curses and prayers always sounded best to her ears in Olden.

Stars above, but it had been too long since she'd had a lover, and it had felt good to play games like the old fae used to, even if those games had ended disastrously and with his blood on her blade . . .

You're fixating again, Ezra droned.

"I cut his throat, and he didn't even flinch," Hrafn admitted admiringly. "Didn't even look away from me like . . . like . . ." She shook

her head. "It doesn't matter."

As they moved farther into the village, rows of makeshift vendor stalls lined either side of the main road.

Ezra flapped his wings in warning. *They look dangerous. All of them.*

Hrafn's hackles rose, but she calmed herself with a slow, deep inhale. *You think everyone looks dangerous.*

And I'm always right.

During the war you were always right, but there isn't a war anymore. Hasn't been for centuries.

Ezra's feathers bristled. *Look over there. I don't like the way that human stares at me.*

Hrafn hefted the top of her pack higher up her back, checked her satchel was secure at her hip, then moved toward the woman at the nearest stall who'd drawn her eye. There weren't many humans gathered yet to form an intimidating crowd, and Hrafn found something soothing in the mortal's clothing choices. Her ebony hair was pulled back with a brightly colored scarf, her skin sable. The pattern of the scarf was intricate and familiar, a pattern she hadn't seen since she'd visited the Manna people outside of the Faelands during her travels before the war—before duty held her here.

I think she likes you, Hrafn soothed.

What's that human doing with her teeth? Ezra gave an agitated flap of his wings.

She's smiling at you.

Nefarious, Ezra said.

Humans aren't like animals. It isn't a threat. You've seen me smile before, haven't you? Perhaps she just likes birds. Hrafn hefted him closer

to the human's stall, struggling to remember the last time she'd had a cause to smile . . .

But birds are idiots, Ezra droned.

"What a beautiful hawk," the woman cooed, and Ezra's chest noticeably puffed with pride. "Is he friendly?"

"He's not," Hrafn warned, and the woman lowered the hand she'd been about to extend.

I'm a friendly demon, Ezra insisted, shuffling along her shoulder eagerly, talons pricking at the leather there.

Only to me, Hrafn said.

Was I supposed to be friendly to anyone else?

Not according to our bargain. "If you let her pet you," Hrafn added quietly, "it looks like she might give you a treat."

Ezra turned his head, aiming one liquid black eye at the stall owner. *I will consider her offering, but I won't be lowering my guard. It could be weapons she hides under this stall. Humans cannot be trusted*.

From the satchel at her hip, the woman pulled out a handful of balled up linen. Unfolding the handkerchief revealed dried bits of meat. She held out a small grouping of them in her palm, lifting it for Ezra to inspect. "I like to keep the hawks near my homestead happy," she explained. "These seem to do the trick. The useful birds keep the vermin away. Though I've never seen one as big and beautiful as yours."

Ezra preened over the compliment. Then he lowered his head, selecting a plump piece of dried meat from the offering and gobbling it down, allowing the woman to rub a few fingers gently across his chest feathers. *This changes nothing. I'm certain she'll still try to kill us both*.

Perhaps the meat is poisoned, Hrafn teased.

Ezra squawked. *Gods, do you really think so?*

No. "Thank you, new friend," Hrafn said to the human.

"I'm called Lindiwe." The woman leaned in and breathed deep. "What's that incredible smell coming from your satchel?"

Hrafn removed one of the fragrant bags of spices from her pack and handed it to the stall-owner.

Lindiwe worked the tie off the opening and peered inside. "How'd you get fresh spices like this in such temperate weather?"

Hrafn glanced at the familiar on her shoulder. "Blood magic helps them grow even when the temperature is wrong."

Ezra was preening again over his job well done.

"Around these parts we can't afford such spices. The cost of transporting them is too much. Don't let anyone undersell you here," Lindiwe cautioned, lowering her voice. "You've got a good product, but I'm afraid I don't have anything that comes close to matching it."

"I want to trade with you," Hrafn said. "You remind me of the Manna I once knew."

"Manna?" Lindiwe's smile was bright and friendly, and she'd spoken the word correctly, not like a horse. She had a tongue accustomed to different languages.

"An Olden word for mortals favored by the gods," Hrafn explained. "Manna or Manna-heim. A blessed people who will treat you like family so long as you are honorable. Long ago when they treated me as family, they favored bright clothing in a pattern like your scarf."

"I've lived here in Reedlet all my life, but this scarf is an old heirloom. Perhaps there's a connection somewhere." Lindiwe waved her in closer.

“Have a look at my vegetables. We’ll make a trade that pleases us both, and you can tell me more about this Manna-heim.”

A fondness warmed in Hrafn’s chest. She was the last of her clan, a warrior who stood out even amongst the fae who lived in the area. Acceptance was rare for her, and she coveted it.

The world had changed so much around her, too quickly for her to keep up with. Hrafn frequently felt left behind by it all. But this woman had done none of the things she’d come to expect from the locals. Lindiwe hadn’t cowered or winced in fear as they spoke, or behaved as though Hrafn would harm or trick her. She’d been kind and inviting from the start.

Just like the Manna-heim who opened their home to her long ago.

Nefarious, Ezra insisted again, and Hrafn rolled her eyes.

“You shouldn’t be here.” The ragged voice came from the road behind them. Ezra let out a hoarse screech of warning at the intruder.

Hrafn turned to find a mortal man with leathery skin glaring at her. He was well-dressed in fine clothing, but his face was covered in abrasions.

“Harrow?” Lindiwe asked, sounding surprised. “What are you going on about?”

“Her.” He pointed a trembling finger at Hrafn. “She shouldn’t be here. She . . .” His words seemed to catch in his throat. He swallowed hard. “Well, I can’t tell you what she did, but that one’s dangerous, she is.”

Lindiwe hooked a hand on her hip. “It’s a little early to be in your cups, isn’t it, Harrow?”

“I haven’t had a drop to drink,” he shouted, and his voice carried to the other stalls, drawing curious eyes. “I’m trying to warn you. Can’t you feel it? Her power is here, heating my skin! Stay away from that witch!”

“I’m not using any magic.” Hrafn fixed her eyes on him, and his hand dropped to his side. His legs set to tremoring, knees knocking together in his trousers. “I don’t know you, and I’ve done you no harm.”

“Lies,” he said, and his voice shook.

There were few things worse to call a fae than liar. They valued their brutal honesty highly. “Hrafnar hafa mus pak,” she hissed through her teeth, because the insult sounded so much better to her in Olden.

The skies darkened overhead. Distant thunder rumbled. Up the road, a horse bucked its rider and fled.

Harrow’s gaze lifted heavenward. “Ancestors save us,” he breathed. “It’s too late.”

Hrafn stepped out from underneath the awning of the makeshift stall. It wasn’t rainclouds that had caused the change in atmosphere as she’d first suspected. A charge built, heating her skin. Thousands of birds, ravens and hawks and finches, birds of every sort, descended from the clouds above them with a chorus of deafening shrieks. They funneled toward the village in a mad dive, looking like dark grains of sand flowing from an overturned hourglass to blanket the earth below.

The monster, Ezra gasped.

Hrafn gritted her teeth. “The monster is free.”

Hrafn had seconds to react. She lunged at Lindiwe as the first deadly flock swooped in and villagers sprinted for cover. Hrafn pulled the human to the ground under the stall, shielding her and her familiar with her wings outstretched. Protecting them from clawing talons and shredding beaks just as the screaming started.

Chapter 4



Malcolm

Malcolm arrived at the witch's cottage early the next morning, his nose less crooked. His horse had carried him the entire way this time, unbothered by the broken tombstones. He'd prepared for a hike that morning, dressing down in a plain neckcloth and tan trousers, which were worn at the cuffs and knees. His long silvery white hair was pulled back in a queue. Solis wanted him to braid it the way his father used to, but his mortal valet didn't know how to do it correctly.

He'd never spared so many thoughts for his hair in his entire life.

Malcolm explored, perusing the archways, peeking in through the windows of Hrafn's thatch cottage. The logs near her garden had been picked clean of their mushrooms. Her smaller footprints led east. He'd wait for her.

Until the stars fall, we'll wait for her, Solis said, and Malcolm chided him for coming on so damnably strong. They weren't going to overwhelm her this time, and it wasn't true anyway. He wasn't so hopelessly sentimental. Not so soon like some fool fledgling with his heart on his sleeve.

Yes, we are, Solis said.

“Stop that nonsense,” Malcolm groaned. “You may be hopeless, but I know better.”

For hours the marquess waited with nothing but his shadow for company, the actions of a man thoroughly lost to *fascination*, not romantic sentiment, he insisted. Malcolm sat in a patch of tall grass, leaning against the wall of the cottage. Just as he was moments away from falling asleep, hoofbeats stirred him to attention.

Solis shrank to throw shade behind them, casting a proper shadow so as not to spook the stranger.

“My lord!” the wiry messenger called to him. He rode a Lunar mount between two towering pines. Lunar mounts had dark coats and were smaller than country horses, built for speed rather than work and light travel like his gray gelding.

Malcolm rose to his feet, wary. He steadied his horse who had been startled by the sudden intrusion, calming the snorting gelding with a firm pat on the side of its broad neck.

The young man licked chapped lips then started in, speaking rapidly. “Reedlet has been attacked, my lord. Twelve villagers are dead. Many more were injured.”

Malcolm’s thoughts immediately went to revolt. His neighbor fighting with tenants about rents must have triggered arguments. But then the young man continued, describing the wild assault of birds and magic.

The messenger pressed on. “The witch responsible has been taken to the city of River Row to be thrown in irons, awaiting the king’s justice.”

Solis rose in the air to hover in front of Malcolm, his panic as palpable as the stress pulsing through their veins. The messenger cowered at the sight of the phantom-like man.

The promise of coin stilled the messenger and kept him from bolting. The marquess overpaid the wiry mortal to take word to the king of the Lunar Court as fast as his leaner horse would carry him.

“I need our Lord King most urgently,” Malcolm pleaded. “Tell him to meet me at the Row’s prison posthaste, and to please take no action until I’ve spoken with him. And . . .” Malcolm hesitated a moment. “And tell him I requested that he leave his bride behind.” He swallowed the bile burning his throat, thinking of the Bloody Queen of Night and the many ways she’d earned such a title. He’d relied on her brand of justice in the past, but here and now it was the absolute last thing he wanted.

He had one chance to salvage this mess. First, his own heavy horse needed to be uncharacteristically swift. Then his old friend, Night, needed to be at his disposal and in a mood to be overly generous. Night was a good man, but Malcolm planned to ask for far more than he had a right to ask anyone, let alone his king.

Mate, Solis whimpered.

“I know, I know,” Malcolm said, mounting his steed.

* * *

It was nearing dusk when he entered the city, the prison walls in sight. Row Barrows, the iron and clay building was called, a dark and damp place he’d visited a few times before when duty called for him to bear witness to a hanging for a crime committed on his lands. The whole ride, he was having trouble getting those gallows out of his mind.

He’d had to trade his gelding out at the first stable he’d come to, and the Lunar mount he rode now was uncertain of his new rider. It made for

unnerving travel.

Outside, among the carriages, he recognized the royal coach, an emblem of a crescent moon on its sides, and his heart both seized and soared at the same moment, as uncertain as he was. Night could be a boon here, or perhaps Malcolm had just brought along his mate's execution all the more swiftly. Not knowing which side the king would take had Malcolm's stomach tying into knots as he dismounted.

His thighs were chafed, and his body ached. He'd ridden more in one day than he had in years. He straightened his waistcoat, wishing he'd worn a proper jacket. He didn't look at all like a lord.

"We must keep our heads," he whispered to Solis, who was not behaving the way a shadow should, pacing side to side before him on the ground, drawing eyes from drivers and guardsmen alike.

Row Barrons was a privately run prison, its warden susceptible to bribes in situations where the offense was mild. In cases where the body count was high, money would get him nowhere. Only authority could win the day here: a king's authority.

A hawk landed on the gas lamp closest to the doors, its large size and ebony feathers recognizable. Hrafn's demon cried at him.

"I'm working on it," he grumbled at the familiar.

Malcolm entered the cool, dank foyer and his stomach dropped. City constables and private guards bickered with a growing crowd of angry residents, some of them injured. Judging by their attire, there were twenty or so country people flooding the entryway. People from Reedlet. His people.

"Hang the witch," one shouted, and the others took up the chant. Men pushed against a tall constable who threatened to see them all in irons if

they didn't get back. Two guards barred the main entrance. Another stood behind a desk with matching star buttons on either side of his collar. Through a window full of bars, the decorated guard shouted orders.

"If you've already given your statement, then go home!" a constable roared near the entrance to the prison.

Drawing from the shadows in the nooks and corners, Solis expanded about the room, until the crowd was shrouded in foreboding night, defying the gaslights that flickered along the walls. A nervous hush fell over the mob. Heads shifted toward the marquess.

The Mad Marquess of Reedholm, they called him. Mad-Maker would be more accurate. He could gather their shadows to him right now and whisper madness in their ears . . . Malcolm could have them all out of his way for good.

Lucky for them, it was a power he didn't dare ever use.

"Get out of my way," Malcolm snapped, and the crowd stumbled over one another to part for the menacing lord.

"We were told to expect you," the guard said from behind the bars, the Barrows emblem of an anvil stitched into the corner of his collared shirt.

A heavy door was opened for Malcolm leading into a narrow, poorly lit corridor. He entered the hall, then paused. "I need to see a prisoner, the witch."

"The king is expecting you. He's with the warden, speaking with the last of the witnesses. The witch is being processed."

Processed? What's that mean? Solis fretted.

Malcolm shook his head. "I need to see the witch. Now." Solis fell over him, shrouding him in intimidating darkness. That and his reputation—he hadn't always been soft—stopped the argument before it began. Malcolm

was led down the other end of the hall, into main holding where first offenders were housed in tiny cells built in a wheel and spoke pattern.

The scent of iron and sweat burned his lungs. Shouting drew his eye to the end of the block. Three guards gathered around a cell, one holding a lantern high, scolding their prisoner. A soapy white powder covered the floor where a second and third guard stood. It bubbled a concerning amount. The third hoisted a bucket that sloshed with water. Another wooden bucket sat at his feet at the ready.

“Everyone gets a bath!” the lantern wielder jeered. “Cooperate or we’ll hit you with iron again!”

Hrafn stood centered in the cell, her ebony wings drawn around her, concealing her from view. Feathers were missing, the exposed sinew red and damaged. A layer of corrosive soap bubbled across the plumes.

Mate, Solis barked. Malcolm was already running, eating up the distance between them with long strides.

Keep your head. Don’t touch the iron, he reminded his soul.

Hrafn’s body shook with pent-up violence. “Leave me be, or I’ll make you eat that soap off the fucking floor!”

The guard pulled the water back, readying to throw it at her.

“Drop the bucket!” Malcolm shouted. The guards turned to face him.

The first lowered his lantern. “My lord?”

Hrafn had pulled the bedding off the cot in her cell, building a small nest with it below her feet. Now the thin sheets were covered in bubbling powder. Water pooled on the cement floor. Malcolm recognized the acrid smell of the cleaner—ret soap, it was called. His servants used gloves when they handled this high a concentration of it. It was only suitable for keeping linens white.

Solis swarmed the guard with the bucket, dousing him in darkness. His limbs solidified, wraith-like things that made the guards gasp and cower. Solis caught the middle guard by the neck, lifting him until he had to stand on the toes of his boots to breathe. The bucket dropped from the guard's hands, splashing water over the rim.

"Wh-what are you doing, my lord?" the guard with the lantern begged. "We's just processing this here witch. Every johnny and jane gots to have a bath. It's the only thing that keeps the bugs away."

"Unlock the godsdamned door to her cell," Malcolm snarled.

"I . . . I's not sure that's wise, my lord," the guard stammered.

Solis turned his shadowy head completely around on his shoulders, unhindered by trivialities like a spine. He glared at the guard, his tail elongating to slash threateningly through the air.

"Hang it all," the guard grunted, eyes widening on the ghoulish sight. He grabbed for the keys at his belt.

Metal scraped against metal and the cell door screeched open. Malcolm sidled inside, careful not to touch the bars. Iron dispelled magic, and it burned and poisoned immortals. Two of the guards fled. Solis kept his hold on the unlucky one.

Hrafn stayed hidden, cocooned by her damaged wings. Up close, her injuries were vast, deep gashes opened in her plumes. She'd been hurt, scratched and clawed, and the soap continued foaming against her broken flesh in patches.

He fetched the water bucket. Dragging it in behind him, he rinsed away the bubbling spots of cleaner. When the water hit her injuries, her body went rigid, and she let out a light grunt.

“Raven,” he said soothingly. For a brief moment, she settled. Her body stopped vibrating with repressed malice like a chained tiger. Malcolm laid a hand on her back, dusting the caustic powder there loose. Slowly Hrafn dropped her wing to peer over it at him. Her cheek was bleeding, her leather clothing torn. One of her eyes was swollen and blotchy.

“Who hit you?” he demanded, his voice rising out of a deep place in his throat, turning it into a rasp he didn’t recognize. “Point him out to me.”

Her wings lifted in a shrug. “There were many who hit me.”

Malcolm unknotted his neckcloth. He handed her the silk, then he unbuttoned his waistcoat and shouldered out of it. They worked together in silence, brushing the harsh soap away from her damaged skin with his clothing. He brought the fabric down the back of her legs. She wiped off her neck and throat, then she shook her braids free of the powder. A careful flap of her wings sent more soap flying.

Nurtured by tenderness, the blooming bond feasted on their shared touches. Warmth pierced his chest, the sensation so welcome, so wonderfully strange, a knot formed in his throat.

“Close your eyes,” he told her, voice husky.

With his thumb, he wiped away the blood on her cheek. The thick, dark lashes he admired feathered shut. She stood very still. Carefully, he brushed the powder free of her face, working a corner of the fabric down her nose, then gently across the delicate flesh of both eyelids, taking special care around her injury. He wiped her brow until the deep furrow there smoothed.

Her lips parted under his thorough attention. Her breath warmed the intimate space between them, and her fingers went limp at her sides.

When the powder was gone, she stood facing him, wings drooping at her back. In the gaslights, her rich brown eyes softened to a fawn color. They fixed on his heart, right where he felt the thrumming pull of the blooming bond the strongest. She avoided meeting his gaze, and he was grateful because his had gone watery.

He hadn't thought he'd ever find a mate, never dared to let himself give in to hope. But now hope was a fierce thing that threatened to crush his chest.

Malcolm nearly asked her if it was all true. Had she hurt all those people in Reedlet—killed those people? But he didn't voice his thoughts because it didn't matter. It didn't change a damn thing about why he was there.

I bet you wish we'd kept her, Solis said. None of this could have happened then.

Oh, he definitely wished he'd kept her, but it had nothing to do with what had occurred at Reedlet. He wanted to keep her because in her presence he'd become the worst sort of scoundrel.

She was about to say something, but then her lips pressed together. Malcolm's tail whipped around him in response to her hesitation, wrapping itself about her thigh, revealing far too many of his innermost feelings in one sweep.

Hrafn blinked at the unfettered show of affection. Her throat bobbed and her tongue loosened. "I don't want to die here. There'd be no honor in it."

"I swear on my very soul, that's not going to happen to you." The grip of his tail tightened.

Her wings, constrained by the narrow space, fluttered. “What now?” she asked gently.

“Now, I have to close you back in this cell, though I don’t want to.” He worked out a breath that felt lodged in his ribs. “Then I go to my king to beg him for your life.”

Hrafn’s black brows furrowed. “Why are you doing all of this for me?”

Needing to touch her more, Malcolm skated his thumb over her chin, and she lifted it. A spark of connection coursed between them, and he gave himself a moment to drown in it. When he swam back up to the surface, he met her calculating gaze. “That’s a foolish question. You already know why I’m doing this.”

Her heavy lashes lowered. The bond thrummed between them, shouting its answer at her. The acrid smell of ret soap mingled with her scent of leather and wilderness. Behind them, the guard struggled, boots scraping against wet cement. A gurgling plea slid over his lips.

“Solis is my shadow there,” Malcolm said, pointing to his soul. “He wants to know if that could be the one who hit you. There are marks on his knuckles.”

Hrafn considered him. “That could be the one . . . Your shadow has a name?”

“I am my shadow, and my shadow is me, but we each have a name,” he said. “We’d like to hurt this man for you, just a little. If you’d allow that.”

She swallowed, then nodded again.

Solis squeezed the guard’s neck, and he cried out. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, so sorry, my lord! Please!” Beside the bucket of water was another container of the harsh soap in its powdered form. Solis used his shadowy

tail to hoist the container. He dumped it over the guard's head, then hit the bucket, banging it into the guard's face.

"I wouldn't mind if he hit him again," Hrafn said.

Malcolm smiled at her. Solis hit him again.

Now release him, Malcolm commanded. Solis did so reluctantly. *No, you can't make him eat the soap*. He knew Solis would ask because he wanted that too, but they'd caused enough trouble here.

"Hit her again, and I'll . . ." Malcolm paused his threat to glance at his mate. Hrafn's hands were in fighting fists at her side. "Hit her again," he told the guard, "and I'll lock you in here with her."

The guard trembled. "I won't touch her, my lord! I swear on my ancestors, I won't!"

Malcolm left the cell and allowed the soap-covered guard to relock it. He felt the weight of Hrafn's eyes as he turned down the cellblock. Walking away from her when she was so clearly in distress was like walking across burs barefoot.

He kept himself moving. If he stopped, even for a second, he might go back, and no one would be able to convince him to leave again. Not without her.

Chapter 5



Malcolm

Malcolm was not in the right mood for greeting his king. He felt neither reverent nor composed. He ambled down a gaslit corridor, his mind tired and full of fog. Malcolm entered the warden's office overly aware of how poorly dressed he was, no jacket and now no waistcoat or neckcloth. He could have been a herdsman come in from the fields, he looked so plain.

Malcolm didn't care for rules of appropriate dress most of the time, but at the moment he missed the authority they could have afforded him. Warden Barrows, a mortal, frowned at him around a thick brown mustache. Whatever he'd been saying to the king, it halted on his lips.

Across the desk from the warden, Harrow sat. The land steward paled as Malcolm entered.

"My lord." Harrow bowed his head briskly. "I've just given my statement . . . If—if you'd like to hear it again . . ."

Night, King of the Lunar Court, sat in the shadows away from a window that let in the fading sunlight, his skin pale gray, silvery eyes slitted against the glare. Night was nocturnal, a Lunar fae with short antlers that curved back off his crown. He wore a midnight blue sash

across a brocade coat, the lapel decorated in shiny crescent buttons. The scent of moon magic—a peppery incense—clung to him.

He didn't look at all like the young man Malcolm had once taught swordplay, but hopefully those days of friendship had meant just as much to the king as they still did to Malcolm. He was hanging everything on sentiment, an emotion he normally held at such low value.

Night didn't acknowledge the marquess at all as he crossed one long leg over the other. "Before the birds attacked the villagers, what did the witch say?" he commanded Harrow.

Harrow scratched a hand through his hair. His clothing was torn and rumpled. His coat was coated in road dust, like he'd ridden here hard and hadn't bothered to brush down his clothing afterward. "We argued. I didn't recognize her words, but they sounded like a threat, they did."

Night leaned back in his chair, steepling slender fingers before his face. His lip was scarred in the corner, the broken skin a darker shade of gray. "Try," he drawled.

"Erm . . ." Harrow glanced at the marquess, a plea in his eyes, a look Malcolm had no intention of responding to. The marquess sensed he wouldn't like whatever his land steward was about to say. "Ravenar? Have must pack? Something close to that, Your Majesty."

"Hrafnar hafa mus pak." Olden rolled off Night's tongue with clarity.

"What's that mean, Your Majesty?" the warden asked.

Night glanced at the marquess then. A fleeting look Malcolm couldn't read. "Birds take you."

"She said *that* of all things right before the attack?" Barrows rapped his knuckles against the top of his desk. "That settles it then. The witch is guilty."

Malcolm's mouth parted, his tongue full of arguments.

Night cut in, "Not quite. There's one last witness. You can go now, Mr. Harrow." The king dismissed him with a tilt of his chin. The steward lumbered to his feet, spouting his thanks and mumbling farewells. He let himself out.

Malcolm's legs felt like soup. He took the vacant chair, turning it to face his king, content to pretend the warden didn't exist. "You came," he breathed.

"I did." The subtle curve in his lip pulled at the scar tissue at the top of his mouth. "Alone, as asked. Now here I sit, acting as a common constable, as curious as I am irritated."

"Apologies, my Lord King—"

Night cocked his head to the side. "It's unlike the man I know to express remorse. It's also unlike you to use formal titles so primly. You must be in distress."

"I am, Lord King."

"I take it the witch is responsible for this . . . distress?" His clever gray eyes saw too much already.

Malcolm felt his pores open. Nervous sweat dampened his hair. He wished the window was larger to allow more of a breeze inside the stuffy room. "We need to borrow your office," he said to the warden. "I require a private word with His Majesty."

Barrows straightened in his seat. "That's not—"

"An excellent suggestion," Night insisted.

Whatever the warden had been about to say, he swallowed it down. It took him a moment to set his expression to something more polite before he stood, bowed at the waist, then headed out.

When the door had closed gently behind him, Night helped himself to Barrows' leather chair, propping his tall boots up on the desktop. "Last we spoke, you assured me you would exert your best efforts toward keeping the peace in Reedholm. I'm having enough issues with Dagrún's estate next door. I hope you were sincere."

"I meant my words," Malcolm vowed. "I'm trying."

The king worked loose his coat buttons, opening it as a fresh breeze blew in through the window. "The Vanir witch—"

"—is my mate."

Night's gaze settled over him. One of his blue-black brows rose. "Then the reason you wanted my queen to stay home is . . . ?"

"Her brand of bloody justice is not needed here. Not today." His jaw clenched. With effort he softened his tone. "I've nothing but respect and admiration for my queen. You know that. But . . ."

"But she's bloody." Night grinned.

Solis had been behaving himself like a proper shadow, but at that he came off the wall behind Malcolm, standing with his dark arms folded broodily.

Night spared him a quick glance. A powerful mage, he was unaffected by Malcolm's unusual soul. "Then you think your witch did as she's accused?"

"I don't know," Malcolm said honestly. "But I beg of you, on my knees if you'd like, show her mercy, Lord King. She can't stay here."

Night scoffed.

"With her wings she barely fits in these cells. One wrong move and the iron will score her skin. This place wasn't designed to hold an immortal

like her.” Malcolm spoke through his teeth. “When I arrived, I found the guards trying to bathe her.”

Night’s expression gentled at that. “Did you kill anyone?”

“No,” Malcolm said grumpily, wishing he had. Solis agreed enthusiastically with his thoughts. “I may owe the warden some reparations for at least one of the guards, however . . .”

“Break any limbs?”

“If anyone had dared to remove her clothing, I would have, but the cowards were too scared of her to get close. They threw poorly cured soap and water on her through the bars. Now she’s supposed to sleep in all that.”

Night chewed at the inside of his cheek, pondering. “Sounds like you showed restraint, then. Or perhaps the blooming bond pull is slight between you?”

Malcolm’s laughter lacked humor. “It’s definitely *not* slight. Were I a younger, more impulsive fae, I’d have wrung all their necks. Though I confess I have nothing to compare the pull to. But damn it all, if this is a slight tug, how does anyone survive a great one?”

Night’s chortling gave him a boyish glow. He looked more like the friend Malcolm had trained all those centuries ago. After the academic young man had finished his mage studies, the former king wanted his heir to master the sword, and Malcolm had been the best. They were close in age, but the marquess had spent his youth much differently: hunting trolls and battling giants, chasing adventure instead of studying books.

“Nothing to compare it to?” Night’s showing of teeth was full of mischief. “You can’t mean that you’ve never met a mate before.” At Malcolm’s drawn expression, Night’s brows rose toward his hair. “Truly?

All this time and you've never stumbled upon even one with match potential?"

"You know what an absolute shit-sack I am. Are you really surprised? Why would the divines give me a mate? Are they so cruel?"

"Apparently they are." Night rubbed a hand across his mouth. Malcolm wondered at the thoughts turning in the clever king's mind. Night was a fae trickster in more ways than one. He could use moon magic to change into the form of a beast, but Malcolm was more interested in his other trickster attributes. The Lord of the Lunar Court could be very conniving.

Hopefully conniving enough to see them through this mess.

"Before I decide anything, there is one more witness I need to speak to," Night said.

Malcolm slunk forward in his seat, disappointed he still needed to wait. Hope had sparked inside him. It churned through his gut. He didn't know what he'd do if it got snuffed out. This was bad. Unrest in the north of the Lunar Province made it worse. The king needed to keep people calm. Guilty or not, simply hanging the witch could prevent more fighting.

But surely his king was too noble for that.

Break her free, Solis said, floating near his shoulder. Kill all who get in our path, and run away with her.

And abandon everything? His father's estate? The workers and tenants who depended on him, and the king he swore allegiance to? Malcolm couldn't do such a reckless thing. He certainly shouldn't for a murderess. Between what happened to Harrow in her woods and the strange attack on the village, she wasn't looking particularly innocent.

Gods above, but he couldn't let anyone harm her either, even if she earned their vengeance.

Night left the desk and opened the door. He spoke with the warden from the threshold. Solis melted into the floor, doing his best impersonation of an appropriate shadow. Minutes later, Mr. Barrows returned with a villager, a human woman with ebony skin and long hair tucked beneath an intricately patterned scarf. She dropped into a low curtsy to honor her king, a shorter curtsy to honor the marquess, and then a chair was given to her, centered in the small office. Barrows stood by the door.

The woman fidgeted uncomfortably, then folded her slender hands in her lap over her skirts. “Thank you for seeing me, Lord King,” she said, bowing her head.

“Your name, girl?” the warden asked.

“Lindiwe Zuma,” the woman said, lips forming into a firm line of irritation.

“Miss Zuma, I’m told you were nearest the witch when the attack occurred,” Night prompted gently.

“Yes.” She wrung her hands in her skirts. “Hrafn saved me. She protected me with her wings. You cannot believe she caused all this. I know what they’re saying, but she couldn’t have done it. Harrow too—he’s alive because of her, but still he shouts against her. I can’t understand that. The worst of the attack came down right on top of us, and she kept us safe.”

Barrows scoffed. “You’re the first to come to her defense. The entire village believes the way Harrow does.”

“She was hurt, too! Why not spare herself from the attack entirely?” Lindiwe said, voice strengthening. “If she called those birds, why be so brave for a stranger like me and a man like Harrow who was so rude to her

at market? I've always considered myself an excellent judge of character, and I'm telling you she didn't do this. Right away I recognized the good in her."

"What did you speak of with her before the birds came?" Night asked.

"Trade mostly. She keeps a smelly hawk for a pet. He's beautiful, but he stinks like a sulfur pit." Her nose wrinkled.

"The men that brought her in," Malcolm asked the room, "were any of them harmed?"

"None were harmed, but Harrow had iron on him," Barrows said dismissively. "She wasn't given much of a chance to fight them."

"I felt her strength as she protected me. When the men came for her, she could have hurt them. She shouted her innocence, but she surrendered. Why not fight to free herself? Why not use the power that called upon the birds to chase them off? That's what I would have done. Wouldn't you?"

"We're only interested in what you saw, Miss Zuma," Barrows said. "Not your speculation."

"I won't pretend I know much about magic, but I didn't see her cast any spells." She paused then. "There was only one thing she said that seemed strange to me at all."

The room filled with silence. Muscles in Malcolm's neck and shoulders went taut as he waited for Miss Zuma to gather herself.

Lindiwe worried her upper lip and straightened her skirts down over her knees. "Moments before the attack, I heard her say, 'the monster is free.' I don't know what she meant by that."

The hope sparking in Malcolm's gut brightened. If some monster was responsible, then his mate might yet see the light of day once more.

“Barrows,” Night said, “please see that Miss Zuma has something to eat. She’s been waiting here to speak with us all day.”

Barrows’ mustache bristled, probably at the notion of being turned into a servant in his own prison, but he didn’t put up a fuss. He guided Lindiwe out into the hall like a gentleman.

When they were alone again, Night folded his arms across his chest, wrinkling his royal sash. He studied Malcolm for a time, fingers skating across the stubble on his cheek. “She’s under arrest. She’s *remaining* under arrest. I can’t just hand her over to you to do as you please, if that’s what you’re hoping for.”

“Sure you can,” Malcolm said. Solis lifted off the floor, thickening into his wraith-like form. “You heard Miss Zuma. Some monster is the one responsible.”

“The witch would not speak with me,” Night mused. “Fae do not like to lie. I’d feel better about all of this if she’d simply state her truth.”

“She’s frightened, alone, and has no reason to trust anyone here.” Especially not Malcolm. Not after he botched her kidnapping and overwhelmed her so. At the memory of their first encounter, he touched the bridge of his nose. It still smarted. He couldn’t fail her now.

“Even you suspect her,” Night accused, and Malcolm winced because he could not argue against that point. He did suspect she or her familiar had some involvement. “But I admit I’m uncertain what magic could have caused birds to behave in such a way. The Seelie have an affinity with nature. I’ll need to converse with their mages and my wife to learn more.”

“She is certainly no Seelie mage.”

“She doesn’t have to look it to have Seelie blood.” Night propped his feet up on the desk, balancing his chair on the back legs. He peered up at

the ceiling like he was searching for wisdom in the tin tiles there. “*If* I gave her to you, what would you say to the warden or the villagers to keep the peace?”

Malcolm sat up straighter, and Solis began to pace side to side. “I would tell them this prison cannot hold her. She needs to be transported somewhere secure. There is more at work here that needs investigating.”

Night glared at him. “You would lie?”

“It’s not a lie,” Malcolm said soothingly. “I’ll rip her out of here myself if pushed to it. This prison truly cannot hold her because of *me*.”

“Hm.” Placated, Night stroked his chin. “She cannot be set free. We haven’t yet ascertained her innocence. She must remain under guard until the culprit is found that clears her of this turbulence.”

“I know.”

“If anyone sees her free—”

“I know, Night. Truly, I understand what is at stake. That you would trust me with such a matter is—”

“Idiotic,” Night grunted.

“Decent of you,” Malcolm said.

“Riots and revolts will be the least of our worries should you soften toward your mate and fail to contain her.” The king’s words trailed off. He poked at a spot on his shoulder, and a strange stain appeared in the rich fabric that hadn’t been there earlier. The spot grew and darkened, and whatever Malcolm wanted to say next, he forgot it as the darkness sprouted into a tiny fairy no bigger than his thumb.

“You brought a fairy child here?” Malcolm blinked in awe at the rare being. Her wings were leathery and bat-like. Claws tipped her spindly

fingers, and her feet were shaped like the talons of a bird of prey. She blinked big black bug-like eyes at him.

Night laughed. “No one *brings* Clapa. She goes where she wants. Don’t you, you little fiend?” he said, his voice full of affection.

The fairy grew until she was big enough to fit snugly in the palm of Night’s hand. She flew in closer, inspecting the marquess, wings buzzing in a flurry at her back.

“Whoot watta?” she jabbered in a tiny voice.

“Your father isn’t going to like that you were a stowaway on my shoulder again,” Night chided. “But go on and say hello to my friend, Lord Malcolm.”

Clapa flew to the king’s head to stand amongst his blue-black hair, chattering and chirping in her strange little language. From there she waved to the marquess. “Lor Mal Mal,” she called.

“Where will you keep your prisoner, Malcolm?” Night asked. His face was stern, but it lost most of its edge as the tiny fairy swung from the point of one of his antlers, bursting into bell-like giggles.

Malcolm wanted to categorize the fairy child as adorable, but something about her mouth full of very sharp teeth deterred him. “Skugborg.”

Night’s expression softened. “That fortress would make a suitable place for holding an army of prisoners. It’s sturdy and nearly deserted. No one around for miles. But . . .”

“My parents died there.” Malcolm spoke the painful thing aloud to spare his king the burden. A prickle of grief stung his chest. “It has a strong place to hold her. Something she’ll fit in properly, and it’s made for an immortal. No horrible iron.”

Night shifted his weight in his seat, and the leather groaned beneath him. "On my command, you'll confine her there."

"I will," he vowed.

"Is it your intention to bond with this woman?"

Of course we will, Solis insisted.

"I'm not sure how successful that will be, given that on your command I'm now her jailer." Suddenly Malcolm needed a drink. Something tall and cold and strong. Something that would get him thoroughly drunk as fast as possible. "But I *will* keep her secure until I clear her. I swear it."

"And you will use your connection to find out what she knows about all this mess. You will learn of this 'monster'." Night added, "Do this for her own sake as much as ours."

Malcolm swallowed around a dry throat. "I will learn all I can and attend to the threat that has rooted itself into my lands."

Clapa dropped from the king's horns and floated down his front. "Gim gim," she said, jabbing a claw at one of his crescent buttons.

Malcolm felt cheered as she teased their king, trying to snatch at the lapel of his coat even as he playfully swatted her away.

"You've enough of my buttons at home," Night said, doing a poor job of sounding like a stern parent with his voice wobbling with mirth. His scarred lip twitched.

"Here," Malcolm said, plucking off a round brass fastening from the front of his shirt. He looked like a wretch with or without it, and he wanted to give the fairy child something for lifting his spirits. Her wings hummed as she hovered before him to inspect his offering.

She took it and placed it on her head like a hat over her wiry black hair. Then she shrank down so small, she and the button, Malcolm could no

longer see where'd she'd gone. A smell like overly ripe fruit emanated from the space she'd once occupied—the scent of fairy blood magic.

“You’ve made a friend for life,” Night warned. “Be sure to keep a close eye on your boots from now on.”

Malcolm had several arrangements to make before the path to Skugborg got any darker or any more dangerous for the horses. He made his farewells to his king, then retreated to the corridor. He had transport to secure and messages to deliver, and food was becoming a pressing necessity . . .

The fairy reappeared, growing before him, scenting the air in citrus. She dangled from the base of his antlers, a surprisingly solid weight given her size. Hanging in front of his face, she held the gifted button against her hair. “Mal Mal, attaway,” she chirped.

Malcolm paused as a thought came to him. He had a great deal to tend to. He could use her help. “I’ll give you all the buttons and shiny things you want, if you’ll take care of someone for me.”

Clapa considered his offer a moment, hanging upside down like a slumbering bat from the ceiling of a cavern. Then she nodded her head and held up one of her tiny hands. Her claws grew, doubling in size.

“Stab?” she chimed.

Malcolm shook his head, swinging her side to side. “No stabbing.”

“Stab stab?” the fairy insisted cheerfully.

“That’s not what I mean when I said I wanted you to take care of them. I meant I’d like you to look after them. To cheer them.” Malcolm pointed to his face and forced a smile. “Cheer them. Like this.”

“No stab,” she said, her tiny features falling. She took a moment to knot her hair around her new button, holding it in place on her head. Then

she nodded. “Clapa attaway, Mal Mal,” she said soothingly, pointing to her own smile which was full of pearly needles.

“That’s better,” he said, uncertain if he’d just made a rather terrible mistake making deals with a fairy child.

Chapter 6



Hrafn

The guards that pulled Hrafn from her cell would not answer her questions about where she was going and why. Her heart leapt into her throat at the thought that this might be it. The end. They were going to score her wings with iron and hang her.

Should she fight them now? Perhaps she should wait until she was outside with a chance to take to the skies . . .

If she would die, it would be by a sword, not by the neck in some shameful way.

Instead of a noose she was dragged to a courtyard where a caged wagon drawn by four large country horses sat waiting. Hrafn relaxed as they rounded the heavy carriage to the opening in the back. There was no iron, only wood and steel and a canvas covering tenting the roof.

Ezra called to her in one long sharp cry from the top of a nearby gas lamp.

“I see you, my friend,” she whispered.

The hands that guided and pulled were rough, some mortal and some fae. She was seated in the wagon with the same forcefulness, her ankles cuffed in heavy metal that squeezed ruthlessly tight, attached to a bar that ran beneath a bench. At least it wasn’t iron. Little concern was given to her

wings, which fit poorly behind her, scraping against the cage walls. She perched on the edge of the seat to give them as much room as was allotted. She leaned forward and spread them, stretching them out. They'd gotten stiff kept snug against her, and the skin stung where her feathers were missing and the flesh was torn.

The door slammed shut and was bolted.

It had been a nightmare trying not to touch the bars of her cell. Iron would burn like the hellfire Ezra called home. But this was only slightly better. The cuffs weighed heavily against her ankles. Her body ached all over.

"Where are you taking me?" Hrafn shouted to the driver.

The driver ignored her, cracking the reins to stir up the horses. The wagon lurched and then they were off, pulling onto a cobblestone street. The smell of city—smog and night air—rid her nose of the dank smell of her cell.

Her injuries had healed poorly because of the soap, and it would take some time for her feathers to grow back in. The missing patches embarrassed her. Her wings were her pride.

Ezra glided through the bars, landing on her knee. Because of the link they shared, they didn't like to be apart for very long. Even though his claws pinched through the leather of her trousers, she welcomed his touch.

They sat in worried silence, feeling the cage sway and bump and catch in every rut.

"If they were going to hang me," Hrafn said, needing to voice her fears aloud, "they would have done it already in the city."

Humans are bloodthirsty creatures. I don't know what will become of us.

Us. Because if she died, he did too.

Then Ezra's wings fluttered, and he cawed at the air. *Intruder*, he warned.

A fairy child appeared in the space beside Hrafn on the bench seat. She grew to the size of Hrafn's hand, dressed in clothing made of flower petals with a button knotted in her blue-black hair like a bonnet made of brass.

"What have we here?" Hrafn felt her lips curve into a rare smile. Fairy children were so blessedly uncommon. It was an honor to happen upon one. "Hecit sapael," she greeted, not knowing what language the fairy spoke.

"Attaway," the fairy chanted—apparently the language she spoke was one of her own invention.

Feral little beast, Ezra grumbled.

Hrafn opened her hand to the child, and the fairy clambered onto it. The talons of her feet scraped gently against the calluses of Hrafn's palm.

The fairy chattered and chirped her invented words.

She just informed me that she was given a button in exchange for stabbing us, Ezra said flatly. Demons were gifted in all languages, even made-up ones. *But she's going to cheer us now instead, she says. Clearly, she's just waiting for a chance to eat us.*

"Well, I think she's charming."

The fairy jabbered exuberantly at the compliment.

She's violent, Ezra fretted. *She just proudly informed me she was born on a battlefield. You know what that means, don't you?*

"That she's destined to be a warrior like us," Hrafn insisted. "People have thought far worse about me, you know."

Don't be naïve. The birthplace of a fairy is just as much a curse as it is a blessing.

“A blessing to a warrior. She is a gift from the gods for people who live by the sword and spear.”

Or a curse of destruction and bloodshed.

“A monster is on the loose,” Hrafn told the fairy, ignoring the worries of her anxious familiar. “We will likely soon be in need of your destruction and bloodshed.”

Clapa's claws elongated to twice their size. “Stab?”

“Stab, stab,” Hrafn said.

The fairy showed off all of her needly teeth in the pearly, predatory smile of a shark that smelled chum.

* * *

The bounce and weave of the wagon lulled Hrafn to sleep several times, only to forcefully pull her awake again when a wheel hit a rut. Each time she slipped into slumber, she awoke feeling even more exhausted.

Jerked alert once more, she blinked out through the bars of the cage to find the sky the color of pitch, cloudless, and full of stars. Her stomach cramped.

“Madratt maek þor mín hlek,” she said to the moon. Prayers and curses always felt best to her in Olden.

Beside her, she found Ezra and the fairy child huddled together against the night's chill.

“I thought you said she was a feral beast?” Hrafn teased.

The fairy used her claws to pet down Ezra's back. He leaned into her touches.

She can eat my face off, he said, so long as she keeps scratching my itches.

Hrafn's keen eyes could see in the dark, a gift of the Divine Night to all the Vanir. The wagon pulled through a long gravel lot, then down a slight incline where the horses slowed to a crawl. She heard the rush of a river in the distance. Thick trees formed a wall that blocked the waters from view. Between willow trees, a stone fortress burst from the ground. An old Vanir fort, Skugborg it was called. The horses came to a standstill before a large carriage house. Movement outside drew her attention, her senses zeroing in on shifting shadows in the dark.

"Hello?"

She heard more movement and shuffling in the overgrown lawn, but no one answered her. Slowly, lights came on inside the great fort as fires were lit and lanterns hung. She counted three individuals moving amongst the rooms.

A large gate parted with shouts and a great clamor. She sat there shivering in the cold for over an hour, studying the lanterns as they were carried from window to window. They were preparing something.

The cage door opened with a loud shriek of metal scratching metal. Hrafn jumped.

A cloaked figure dropped his hood. Her inhale caught in her lungs. She released it with a whoosh of breath.

Malcolm clambered inside, boots landing heavily against wooden rungs. He sat on the bench across from her, eyes red-rimmed and smudged. He looked as bad as she felt. They stared at each other for a moment in

charged silence. The painful prick at her soul that had appeared the day she met him was gone. She had an inkling as to why it no longer bothered her, but she shoved the thought away. Hrafn had plans that such fancy could ruin.

The sound of the wind moving through the trees and the chirrup of the bugs singing their songs to one another faded away. Wrung out from top to bottom, the call of him overwhelmed her senses.

“Are you hungry?”

“No,” she said more sternly than she meant to. Her stomach was in knots. She worked her throat. “Am I to hang?”

“Never,” Malcolm rasped. “I can tolerate no harm against you.”

His words spoken so matter-of-factly washed over her, steady and reassuring. Her stomach began to unclench. “Then your king granted your request?”

“He did. But don’t rejoice just yet. You remain under arrest,” he warned. “My king made me your jailer. You’ll stay here with me in this fortress under my command. You’ll make no attempts to leave the place I’ve prepared for you. I have questions. You will answer me, and I’ll only hear honesty from your lips.”

“I’m no liar,” she breathed. The suggestion that she would dare do otherwise put something hot and prickly in her chest. It made her want to take up a spear and defend her honor. Her fingernails dug into the palms of her hands.

He sat unflinching in the face of her aggravation. “Did you conjure the attack on Reedlet?”

“No.” Hrafn blinked at him, confounded. “You think I’m guilty?”

“I did at first. Then I spoke to a witness. Now I’m undecided on the matter.”

“You believed I killed those people . . . and you came and saved me from that prison anyway . . . ?” She could make no sense of the lord before her. The man who took her with his magic shadows and then rejected her by releasing her without a fight. Now, in her time of need, he came to her aid, placing her above his own people like she had great value to him whatever her guilt.

Like he wanted to claim her.

“If you’re about to ask me why I saved you, don’t.” He pressed his palm over his heart, the same place where she felt the pull of him the strongest. Strangling the wool of his cloak, he made a fist. Strain lined his face, turning it drawn and pale. “It’s been a very, very long couple of days since I met you, Hrafn of the Vanir. I’m too tired for foolish questions, and we’re both too old to pretend we don’t know what this is between us.”

Her lashes lowered. Of course she knew what budded between them. The pull of their blooming bond was glorious, but that didn’t make his actions any less unbelievable.

She could make no sense of him.

She could hardly fathom the way her body reacted. Near him, she felt like she’d been struck through by lightning, then put back together and wrapped in warm gossamer. Like she’d gone weightless and was both floating and sinking in a pit with no bottom. The blooming mate bond tugged at her with such tenacity that the line between violence and passion, friend and enemy, was an unfathomable blur.

“I didn’t kill anyone,” she said finally. “There is no honor in hurting those people. I didn’t summon the birds. I wouldn’t even know how to do

such a thing.”

“But you know who did,” he said with cool certainty.

She dropped her chin in assent. Yes, she knew the monster responsible well. They’d shared a cage for centuries. It was the prisoner, she the jailer. She glanced down at the cuffs that weighed against her ankles. Oh, how the tables had turned. “I know the monster responsible.”

“Can you name it?”

She shook her head. “It doesn’t have a name. It gathered those birds from my woods and sent them to the village.”

“Why?”

“To cause suffering. The monster is cruel and bored.”

The fairy child made her presence known then. Leaving behind Ezra who slept soundly on the bench seat, she flew toward the fae lord, her wings a buzzing blur at her back. “Raf Raf, attaway,” she chattered.

“Clapa,” Malcolm greeted the fairy, his mouth curling into a smirk, “thank you for keeping my guest company during the long transport. You’ve done well.” He reached inside his cloak, then handed her a shiny piece of round brass. Another button to match the one knotted in her hair.

She took it greedily in her hands, chattering excitedly. Using the wispy blue-black strands that framed her face, she tied the button below her chin, wearing it like a pendant.

The strange wraith-like shadow that served the fae lord appeared behind him. He swooped in and hovered close. Even at night the shadow looked a great deal like Malcolm, his mirror image made of darkness. The shadow reached one of his hands out toward Hrafn and she flinched.

“He won’t hurt you,” Malcolm soothed.

“I’m not afraid of him,” she said sternly, feeling a pang of shame over their first encounter when she’d swooned like some green fledgling. That hadn’t been fear either, and it gnawed at her that he would think that of her. She’d faced down dragons and charging armies, but instinct had overwhelmed her. “Malcolm . . .” she began, but she didn’t have the words to voice her concerns fully. She was too exhausted. Her mind was a cloudy mess, her lids heavy.

Malcolm. It was a Seelie name. It made her, a world traveler, curious since most Seelie lived in the northern provinces on the other side of the River Eventide, the same river she heard rushing in the distance. Seelie blood explained his light coloring. When she studied his face, she recognized something of the Vanir lord she knew. The shape of his deep blue eyes was familiar, as was the dimple in his chin, his proud nose, and the stout, pronged antlers that curved out of his ashen hair.

The Mad Maker, god of shadows, shared those same attributes. He must be Malcolm’s father. But where was the Mad Maker now?

“If I remove your cuffs, will you behave? Or do I need to have Solis cart you inside?” His shadow scooted in closer. The heat the wraith-like being let off warmed her against the night’s chill. She leaned into that heat.

“All I want right now is a bed,” she said, and her voice cracked. She was beyond spent.

“You have a bed inside,” Malcolm promised. “And you’ll be safe here.”

“As safe as a caged bird. I’m grateful for what you’ve done for me, so I’ll warn you now. I have no patience for cages. Keeping me will go as well for you as it did the first time we met.” If he thought he could keep

her, then he significantly underestimated the power of the god blood in her veins.

Malcolm touched his nose. A bump on the bridge was all that remained of their first violent encounter. “When you want a fight, Hrafn of the Vanir, you’ll get one.”

Her wings flittered at that. His words didn’t sound entirely like a threat, because violence to the Vanir was affection—until the point someone killed you.

“Perhaps I’ll do more than bloody your nose next time,” she warned. “I could dislocate your knee. Break your arm. Maybe a leg . . . Both legs.”

“I’m trying to have a serious conversation with you,” Malcolm stressed, squeezing the bridge of his nose. “I need you to stop saying such romantic things to me.”

Hrafn stared up at him, her mouth open, ready with yet another violent threat. Romantic? Was he being serious? By the gods, he looked serious. The notion was so damned delightful her stomach fluttered. Yes, this man had Vanir in him indeed.

“If you’re quite finished, let’s get you to your bed.” His voice had dropped an octave. The velvety sound curled through her like smoke, and her heart kicked against her ribs. Malcolm extended his hand to her as his shadows undid the cuffs at her ankles with touches that were whisper-soft. “Can you stand?”

First, she’d swooned in his presence and now this. Hrafn groaned. Soon he’d be questioning if she was really Vanir. “My clan called me Hrafn pidd maldrom. I swear to you I’m not so weak. Not usually. You’ve just . . . caught me at a disadvantage again . . .”

“Deadly little bird,” Malcolm mused. “I know you’re not weak. Let me help you, or I’ll think you’re worse than weak. I’ll think you stupidly stubborn.”

“Fair enough.” She took his hand at the wrist. Her joints were stiff. The hour was late, and the day had been long and full of trials. She carried each tribulation in her muscles and the abrasions on her wings and face.

Malcolm’s arm came around her, as surprisingly gentle as his touch had been in her cell earlier when she’d been surrounded by enemies—enemies her mate had graciously protected her from, even avenged her on. The memory made her pulse surge.

Blood roared in Hrafn’s ears as his hold tightened around her waist. Her wings responded with an involuntary flutter, a sign of attraction as suggestive as a cock growing hard. She pulled the appendages in around herself, cocooning her back and sides as she worked slowly to her feet. The bond vibrated through her chest, surging in her pulse, fed by the contact between them. He took her wrist in his opposite hand. His touch was light but profound. Muscles in her legs and the arches of her feet screamed at her as she made her first few steps, leaning into the strength her mate offered her.

Gods, she wanted a bed. It didn’t even need to be a particularly nice one. Anything would do. Just something clean to rest her body on so she could embrace the healing sleep her body desperately craved. What she’d done on the way there could not be counted as restful. Those bursts of unconsciousness had left her nauseous. Her eyes burned.

Clapa flew to Ezra’s slumbering side, her buttons swaying in her hair and against her chest. She attempted to rouse him by whispering and

clapping her tiny hands. When that didn't work, she screamed. The high-pitched noise might have broken glass, were any nearby.

Malcolm cursed. Hrafn covered her ears.

Ezra squawked awake, wings flapping. *Am I dead?*

Not yet, Hrafn teased.

When then? Tomorrow?

No, never. I'm sorry, Ezra. I didn't mean to worry you. Hrafn forgot that the demon struggled to understand the subtleties of sarcasm. *I'm not going to be hanged. Come along now. We're staying here in this fortress tonight.*

Bracing her, Malcolm moved them slowly out of the wagon, then through lush lawn damp with dew, past heavy wooden gates plated in steel. A shell keep surrounded the main buildings, the stone walls so high Hrafn felt tiny in their presence. Two towers flanked her new prison, one facing east and the other west. The first was made of old sandstone. The second was taller and newly built of granite, topped with a battlement. The courtyard was less overgrown, more recently tended to. The outbuildings were shut up tight, barred with locks and heavy metal chains covered in vines and fairy twine.

She nearly fell asleep standing; her chin dropped and rebounded. She blinked to clear her blurry eyes. Hrafn's exhaustion turned her legs to butter as they entered the keep.

Ezra soared in overhead.

Where are you going? she asked him.

To learn what I can of this place, he said, swooping around the entryway. The walls were old stone, but the keep was furnished like a

manor with paintings and incense altars for the divines. *I'll see you in the morning.*

All right. She hadn't been this sore or worn out since the war . . . Hrafn sunk against Malcolm, her head falling on his shoulder.

"I know it must feel like I'm giving in, but you can't keep me," she said on a sigh as her mate bore her toward an intimidating set of steep stairs. "I won't let you keep me."

His breathy laugh showcased his doubt. She didn't have it in her to argue with him. She'd prove her words later.

The gaslights were dim, gentle on her tired eyes. Above her, the ceilings were lofted and full of cobwebs. They struggled at the stairs, taking them slowly. Halfway they both needed a break, leaning against one another to share several breaths. Gods, they were both beat to hell. He looked like a sloppy herdsman dragged inside by his flock and wrapped in a frumpy cloak. He smelled a bit like one too, like salty sweat and muddy wool. She preferred his smell to the lingering scent of caustic soap on her wings and in her hair. What a wretched pair they made, hobbling toward their destination.

Her boots slipped on the landing. Her mate caught her and pulled her tight against him. He was broad and the planes of his body were a welcomed, steadying force. His shadow came to their aid, brushing up behind them. Solis felt soft and warm and not entirely solid. His touch reminded her of a dream moments before waking when her imaginings still seemed almost real.

Her mate took a moment to right himself before pressing on. Left of the stairs, Malcolm opened the door to her new prison with his boot, knocking the heavy thing aside. There was one tiny window. This hadn't

been a bedroom originally, perhaps a storage space. It was small with only one entry point and several locks on the door and rows of wooden shelves. The space had likely been converted just for her.

Oh, joy, she grumbled to herself.

A newly lit fire crackled in a small hearth, casting the modest room in an amber glow. Hrafn could search for the best escape route another time. She only had eyes for the bed.

Malcolm helped her into it. Hrafn flopped onto a cloud of layers and layers of quilts and bedding. She unfurled her wings with a great groan, letting them droop on either side of the mattress—a fine mattress. She let out another exhale of relief. The bed was made of wool and straw. She could tell by feel and smell. Because of her wings, Hrafn disliked down feather cushions the same way she'd dislike knowing she was sleeping on something made of human hair. She cringed at the thought. Both made her uneasy, a personal bugbear.

She felt a tug on her foot and, craning her neck, found her mate working off her boots. He dropped them on the floor one at a time. They landed with an echoing thunk against the hardwood. “There’s garments in the trunk over here, but they’re likely much too large for you. The stablemaster’s wife who owned them was at least a head taller than you.”

Hrafn reached for the fastening at the back of her neck, then gave up moments later. Her abused muscles hurt too much.

“Sidhek,” she cursed into the blankets. Hrafn would sleep with her clothes on, then.

Malcolm was at her side moments later, loosening the fastenings at the base of her neck and the others hidden under her wings.

“Thank you,” she grunted.

“I can rip a hole in a night rail for your wings if you want something clean to put on.”

She tested the softness of the pillows, smushing it under her chin and cheek. The bedding was fresh and that was a haven. “Would you help me get my trousers off? After that I’ll be fine.”

Fae were not the sort to be shy about their bodies. The Vanir even less so, though admittedly as his gentle fingers worked free the buttons of her leathers, she couldn’t claim she was entirely unaffected by him or by the way his flesh so knowledgeably skated across her hips to find the openings.

“That was efficient work.” Hrafn peered over at him, a brow raised. “You’ve definitely done that before.”

His mouth curved in a smug smile that suited him well. “I confess I’ve had a great deal of practice undressing women.”

Hrafn was not bothered by the news. She had a great deal of experience undressing others as well.

His fingers hooked into the fall front of her leather trousers, then he worked them down her hips in a side-to-side motion. She moved with him to ease the process. Her drawers slid partially down in the fight to get her trousers off. He pulled them back up for her, covering her bottom, then he folded her pants neatly and set them on the trunk beside the bed.

Hrafn wriggled out of her jerkin. Malcolm took it from her and folded it as well, stacking it on her trousers. He hovered there, a hand resting on the top of her clothing, his gaze contemplative.

“If you’re thinking of staying,” Hrafn said, “be warned, I’m told I’m violent in my sleep. Not even my familiar would dare share a bed with me.”

“You’re violent when you’re awake.” Malcolm chuckled, then he studied her, his fingers flexing at his sides like he wasn’t sure what to do with them. “I’m having trouble reading you.”

“I’m not full of secrets. Ask what you want to know.”

“Do you want me to stay tonight?” he said, and the question sent Hrafn reeling for a moment. Were the symptoms of her loneliness so blatant, or had the bond given her away? “I won’t be much company. I’m dead on my feet. I’ll be out like a light the second my head hits a pillow. You could beat me all you like while you dream, and I don’t think I’d notice till morning.”

Hrafn chewed at her cheek, uncertain. She loved exploring new places while she was awake, but when night fell, she preferred a bed she knew. Everything about this place was strange to her except for him.

Her body called to his. It knew him, knew there would be comfort just in his nearness.

She was hungry for the acceptance and kindness that had been denied her since her clan dissolved and the world changed, both things Malcolm’s gentle touches promised to be a balm for. For too long she’d been stuck standing vigil over that damned cage. The attack of birds and the cruel guards had exacerbated her baser needs.

It would be so nice to be taken care of by him, a balm for her loneliness.

As though he understood her thoughts, Malcolm crossed to the bed and reached for her, catching one of her loose braids and running it through his fingers, promising more tenderness. That careful touch was more effective than any soothing words he could have said. Yesterday, he’d been

unflinching in the face of hurled spears and knives at his throat. Today he'd stood beside her when she needed him most.

That morning at Reedlet, the moment she'd realized the cage had failed and the monster was free, she'd been almost as relieved as she was mortified. She could move on now. There was no prison left to watch over. She'd failed the task set before her, but it was finally over. The world was open to her once more. Malcolm was a complication as much as he was a balm, an obstacle that could keep her in place, but she was done being held still.

He made her curious. He made her *want*. But her mate belonged here in this world, and she didn't. He was the jailer to her new prison in more ways than one.

"It's best if you don't stay," she whispered.

He made no attempts to change her mind, but frown lines edged his mouth. In farewell, he brushed a hand one last time through her hair before he pulled away.

The moment the door closed behind him, and the lock slid home—and then another lock and another lock and another lock—the loneliness ate at her. In his absence, the room grew larger and hollower. Just listening to his heavy breathing would have been better than the sound of embers crackling and the nothingness behind it. Hrafn regretted letting him go.

Chapter 7



Malcolm

The following morning, Malcolm left his room, curious why Cook hadn't had anything brought up for him yet after he rang for breakfast. He knocked at Hrafn's door shortly after. She didn't make a sound. It wasn't a surprise that she was still asleep considering the evening they'd had.

Solis wanted to slip under the crack in the door and check on her.

"Let her have her peace," Malcolm said. "You can wake her when we have something to offer her."

The blooming bond encouraged gift-giving. Solis thrilled at the idea of nourishing their mate, elongating his shadow so that it shot down the stairs ahead of him.

When he entered the great hall, his senses put him on alert. None of the tables were set. The sound of servants scuttling about was absent. He didn't employ idling layabouts. The staff should have risen hours ago to prepare for him and his—well, he couldn't call Hrafn a guest.

A crash brought him running out into the adjacent corridor. His gaze snapped side to side, in search of the source.

Someone or something had knocked over an altar made to honor the Divine Night with a symbol of a moon at its face and a bowl for incense at

the base.

But no one was there.

Fairy mischief? Solis wondered.

Instincts at full alert, Malcolm lowered into a fighting crouch. Solis rose off the wall next to him, floating ghost-like at his side. He felt naked without his sword.

“Go and have a look,” he whispered.

Solis glided ahead of him.

When his soul didn’t sound the alarm, he peeked around the corner.

Hands grasped him from behind, their touch blisteringly hot. A murderous shout rent the air. The grip that held him was strong. They pulled him down off his feet. He landed on his knees before his attacker.

A man.

A tall, human man, red in the face and completely naked. Madness gleamed in his pale eyes, and spit frothed in the corners of his mouth.

“I kill,” the man shouted. He was covered in little abrasions, his feet filthy, his prick swinging between his thighs.

Crouched, Malcolm kicked at his attacker’s knee, unbalancing him. Then he swung his leg wide and knocked the man’s feet out from under him. The attacker landed with a thud. Malcolm lunged for the man’s neck, grabbing him by his dark hair and pulling him into a chokehold.

The human scratched and kicked with a strength no mortal should possess.

“I kill . . . I k-kill . . .” the man wheezed as Malcolm tightened his arm around the intruder’s throat, locking the hold in place. “Kill you!”

The human’s skin was almost too hot to hold, covered in an unnatural glamour that fueled the unusual strength and the wildness in his gaze. His

veins were bright red, and they stood out around his eyes and down his neck, polluted by magic. More commotion filled the halls. Shouted madness echoed off the stone walls. Then came the sound of metal piercing flesh and a death cry.

Malcolm fought to squeeze the life out of his thrashing attacker, turning them to face his next opponent as light footsteps neared.

Hrafn rounded the corner, Solis floating at her side, viscera splattered on her jerkin, blood-soaked spear in hand. Malcolm pinned the fighting mortal down with his legs and locked his arm back against the man's throat, squeezing tight until the body finally went limp.

Clapa soared down the corridor behind them, claws elongated and dripping red.

"How—" Malcolm began.

A whoosh of air stirred his hair as Hrafn launched her spear. It landed with a bodily thud just above his head. He craned his neck as the attacker he hadn't seen coming fell to the floor behind him, spear jutting out of his bare chest.

"Gods' sakes," Malcolm gasped. "How in the blazing stars did you get out of your room?" He shoved away the limp body of his first attacker and scrambled to his feet.

Hrafn crossed to the second corpse, plucking her spear free with the wet sound of suction and a small arc of crimson. She looked Malcolm over, a quick sweep from antlers to boots, then a glance at the dead man he'd finished off. "With your bare hands." Her chin lifted in appraisal. "Not bad."

"Hrafn," he growled, tail snapping at the air, "how'd you get out of your fucking room?"

“You’ve more important things to worry about.” There was blood on her cheek. Her leathers were different from the night before. The spear was familiar—

It was the same spear she’d thrown at him before.

The weapon dissolved into a dark mist in her hands, reforming into a large black hawk that glided to her shoulder. The demon bird flapped its wings, reeking of sulfur.

“You . . . You went to your home?” The scent of Hell and blood magic stung his nose.

“I needed supplies.” She bit her lip, pondering something. Shuffling her feet, her expression softened. “I thought about leaving, but I’ve unfinished business here. I’m glad I returned. I found men touched by the monster scaling your fortress. Ezra and I killed the first right off your walls then warned your servants. Little Clapa took the face off the second and ripped the throat out of another. She’s quite useful. Careful in the gatehouse, though—she had fun in there, made quite the mess of her opponent.”

Clapa chattered excitedly at that, brandishing her filthy claws.

“While your servants had the good sense to hide,” Hrafn continued, “I tried to find you, but this place is massive, and I didn’t know where your room was.” She jutted her chin down the corridor. “The dead one over there found me in the entryway. He was wily. It took a bit to bring him down. Your Solis assisted just in time.” The corner of her mouth tugged up.

“You’re having fun,” he accused.

Her brow furrowed. “Aren’t you?”

He was a little, now that she mentioned it . . . not that he planned to share that out loud. It seemed indecent to confess such a thing in a hall surrounded by piles of the dead—the naked dead, with their balls hanging out, no less. The attackers reminded him of Harrow and the time he’d been spelled, the runes he’d destroyed—the monster he’d undoubtedly disturbed—and the graves he’d violated, all while shouting that his skin was on fire.

He should have recognized the signs. That wasn’t witch blood magic. His own shadow glamour burned, but it had been an age since he’d cast anything with it. His mad magic was dangerous.

Malcolm rubbed at his forehead, his blood pressure dropping, his arms shaking from the rush of near death. “Hrafn, if anyone saw you—”

“No one saw me. My woods touch the trees outside, and I’m a quick flyer. The clouds provide excellent coverage.”

“If anyone did—”

“Malcolm,” she barked, and he met her eyes. “No one saw me aside from your servants and the dead men here. Unless you doubt the loyalty of those in your service, or you’re worried the dead will rise and summon a mob to see me hanged—”

“I don’t doubt my servants. I was careful with whom I invited here.” Rubbing circles in his forehead wasn’t working to calm himself. He ran a hand through his messy hair, bumping the base of his antlers. “I was ordered to confine you by my king, and one blasted night later, I’ve already failed him and *you* by extension.”

Hrafn scoffed. “Feel sorry for yourself another time. War is upon you, lordling. Your land is under siege by a monster with more power than my clan ever realized, and none can save it but the god of shadows.”

The corpse at his feet moaned. All eyes snapped to the body on the ground. For a moment Malcolm assumed Hrafn's snide comment had come to fruition, but the dead man's eyes remained glazed and pale. The mouth fell open and black pooled inside it.

Shadows billowed from the lifeless lips, the glittery glamour fleeing the body. More darkness bled from the other corpses, merging together in the corridor before the shocked onlookers.

Stop them! Solis shouted, and the marquess remembered himself.

He was the god of shadows now. His father would not be coming to save them, for that same mad darkness had consumed the old lord in these very walls, robbing him of life.

"Stop," Malcolm shouted, grief for the one who'd raised him fueling the command. This corridor had once held such pleasant memories: the booming sound of Father's laughter, the clatter of wood on wood as young Malcolm received his first lessons in swordcraft . . . But that was gone now.

The ethereal essence attempted to evaporate into the walls, but it slowed under Malcolm's orders, resisting him. The Mad Marquess lowered his center of gravity and breathed deep, collecting himself. Solis dove for the essences, grabbing the shadows by the wispy tendrils and dragging them toward Malcolm.

The power, the marquess's natural glamour burning through his chest, was not an ability he trusted. His father had been too gracious with the shadows that betrayed him. But even after all these years, commanding them felt as surprisingly right as the air filling his lungs or the blood pumping through his veins, even if it did burn hotter than he remembered and strain his muscles more deeply.

Malcolm had vowed never to dabble again with such magic, but duty called. He could not let these wicked apparitions return to the phantom who'd sent them. They needed a new master.

"Break," Malcolm whispered, and Solis echoed the command in the same breath. The retreating shadows hardened before him. He and his soul set to work, tearing off pieces of the ethereal essences, turning them into bumpy little masses that rolled amongst the tiles.

The first mass looked like tiny clumps of storm clouds smushed together. The little storm cloud opened its slit for a mouth and wailed, a noise like the cry of a dying rabbit.

The demon hawk squawked in shock and took to the rafters.

"It's all right, Ezra," Hrafn told her familiar. She crossed to the wailing one and bent at the waist, investigating it. Her braids fell over her shoulders, hanging just above the ground. Intrigued by her hair, the storm cloud immediately stopped crying. It chomped toothlessly on the ends of her plait. "They look like lumpy little shadow babies."

"They're not babies," Malcolm scolded. "Shadows cannot be destroyed. I've broken them down into this base form. When they come together again, they'll recognize me as master and no longer serve the monster."

Solis tended to the rest, ripping them into mounds no bigger than a fist, then tucking them into the crook of his arm or scooping them up with his dark tail. Malcolm lowered his hand, allowing a fluffy gray mass to roll into his offered palm. Its slit for a mouth opened wide, then clamped down around his thumb, gumming it.

"Not a baby?" Hrafn said, lifting a brow archly. "Then what's that one doing to your hand?"

“It’s . . . sucking on my thumb.” The puff of coal gray in his palm gnawed at the digit, its mouth icy cold but otherwise harmless. “You,” he grumped, pointing at his mate with his free hand, ignoring the slurping sounds coming from the other. “You aren’t to leave my godsdamned sight. We’ll tend to the shadows—”

“Babies,” she said drolly.

“—first, then I’m dealing with you!”

The creases near her velvety brown eyes crinkled. “Why do I like the sound of that?”

“You shouldn’t,” he grouched.

Then why do we like the sound of that? Solis asked unhelpfully, duty warring with desire inside them. Despising the position he was in—captor and mate—Malcolm made an angry sound in his throat.

The amusement at his expense in her near-smile made his blood run hot.

Hrafn can’t roam free, he reminded Solis. She’s still under arrest. The king ordered her confined.

But we know she’s innocent, Solis fussed. *She saved us, and we believe her words. The evidence of a powerful rogue phantom is right there, sucking on your—*

Shut up. This was hard enough as it was. He didn’t need his own soul second-guessing him.

Malcolm made a stern gesture for Hrafn to lead the way into the great hall.

She complied with her nose in the air. “Don’t get the wrong idea. I go where I please, lordling. Where I please just so happens to be in this same direction.”

The fortress had been fitted with enough tables to feed a large regiment. Hrafn picked the one nearest the archway and sat down. Her demon joined her, perching on the decorative fixtures of her high-backed chair.

The remaining trail of little dark patches of smog followed Malcolm like a line of ducklings chasing their mother to the next pond. He made for the fireplace, then fussed over the flint. Starting a small fire would have been easier without the added baby—shadow, *not* baby—hanging off his thumb.

“How long does it take for them to form back together? Clearly they already consider you daddy,” Hrafn teased, kicking her feet up on the table and leaning back in her chair. Battle lust had a profound effect on her. The warrior’s subtle sarcasm was gone, replaced by a blatant playfulness he wished he could enjoy more.

“*Master*,” he grumped at her. “And they can be fickle when they’re this small. It’ll probably be a week or two at least before they reform.” Were he as practiced with his abilities as he once was, it wouldn’t have taken more than a few days.

Malcolm used the steel poker to stir old coals from a previous fire into a new blaze, setting the embers to smolder. Solis brought in the last of the shadows. Clapa assisted, herding the curious strays that kept rolling away from the group with gentle taps of her claws.

“Careful,” Malcolm warned.

Clapa tapped at one ball of shade too hard. The inky blob opened its mouth so wide it looked like it’d been cut in half. It spat in her face. Chittering, the fairy rubbed her hands down her nose and lips, smearing the blue substance and staining her skin.

She looked down at her palms covered in indigo.

“They startle easily,” Malcolm explained.

Clapa blinked at the mess for a moment. Then her head tipped back. She grabbed her stomach and cackled, the sound not unlike the tinkling of tiny bells.

“Attaway, Puff-Puff,” she said, rolling it more forcefully toward the fire the way a child might ball up a boulder of powder after a heavy snow.

Hrafn sent her demon to scout around the fortress from the air, checking for any remaining people poisoned by the monster. One of Malcolm’s footmen entered the great hall then, looking pale and disheveled. Malcolm reassured him that the worst was over. He was sent to call for the cook and gather the groom and the other stable hands to tend to the dead.

“They’re innocent people,” Malcolm told his servant. “Treat them with great respect.”

Malcolm was so hungry and thirsty an ache was building in his skull. But first he had to attend to the damn shadows. When the coals glowed red, he broke them apart with the poker and pushed them out of the fire. Hungry little shadows gathered around, gobbling up the bits of glowing embers.

“The shadows like the light,” Hrafn mused, craning her neck to watch. “It’s almost poetic.”

“Nothing poetic about what comes out of them when they’re done with it, though,” Malcolm said, grimacing.

Solis took over the work of raking out new coals. Malcolm was starved, his nerves were shot enough for all of them, and he needed wine.

Lots of it.

A footman brought out refreshments on a cart. Malcolm sunk broodily into a chair across from his mate. She seemed unbothered by his poor mood. She'd removed her soiled jerkin and given it to the footman, oblivious of the blood still streaking her cheek. The shirt beneath was made of a thick, fitted cotton. It hugged the lean muscles of her shoulders and cupped her chest.

She wasn't wearing anything underneath it. Her nipples tented the fabric.

There was a glow about her since the fight, a shimmer of excitement in her brown eyes, a flush in her cheeks. She appeared younger, a warrior high on victory. Gods, he envied her. She didn't have to spare a single thought for the state of her lands or the people who lived on them. She didn't have to worry about whom the dead belonged to and what the ramifications of their demise would mean to the people who called his lands home.

She looked like freedom incarnate, hair down in flowing plaits, a quiet confidence in her every movement.

Malcolm poured himself and his mate a tall glass of red. Tea was set out between them by the footman. Malcolm filled a hot cup for Clapa, but the fairy didn't drink it. She unwound her buttons from her hair, stripped off her clothing made of flower petals, and bathed in the cup instead. Blood and blue shadowy saliva darkened the tea.

Hrafn took an enthusiastic swallow of her wine, a small drop leaking out the side of her mouth. Malcolm watched the trail it made with fascination, then a growing pinch of jealousy as it dipped down the strong column of her throat. Lowering the glass, she swiped at the stray drop. "Lunar wine might as well be water."

“It’ll still get you drunk,” Malcolm rasped between gulps. When his glass was empty, he sat it down beside hers. “Tell me about your monster.”

“The shadow lord, your father,” she added cautiously, “he called the monster a phantom.”

“Mindless, soulless, hapless creatures not so different from demons,” Malcolm said.

“Don’t let my familiar Ezra hear you saying that. They both originate in the lake of fire below the Hell Mountains, but they’re different,” Hrafn insisted, “and this one is not soulless. It was once a familiar.”

The table was set around them. Malcolm leaned back, allowing a napkin to be tucked in near his belt. Plates were laid, and the flatware came next.

His stomach growled. He took his fork in hand in preparation. “The familiar of who?”

The tops of her wings arched in a shrug. “We never knew. When the old gods roamed these parts, it wasn’t uncommon to stumble upon a familiar who’d been abandoned by their witch. Gods have vast souls. They’d exchange a small, powerful piece of theirs for a service requiring blood magic. When the job was done, their need for the familiar ended.”

“A familiar scorned,” Malcolm said.

“Like our fairy friend,” Hrafn whispered. Clapa didn’t seem to notice that she’d become the subject of their conversation. She was doing her very best impression of a fountain, spitting a stream of black tea in a perfect arc, soaking blissfully in the steam that curled off the ceramic rim of her cup. “She is one such familiar abandoned by her witch. She and Ezra have been talking.”

A pinch of sympathy squeezed Malcolm's heart. Despite Clapa's intimidating smile, he never could imagine abandoning such a remarkable child. She was a little girl who gave her friendship away just for a button one moment and ripped out throats the next. Clapa had his protection, even if there was a good chance that the powerful little thing could have been alive longer than him. Fairies aged differently, after all.

"Call upon the Mad Maker," Hrafn said, and Malcolm stiffened. "He trapped the monster once before with his shadows. He made its prison with the dead of our people and sealed it shut with runes on their tombstones. Then he charged my clan—what remained of us after the war—with guarding it."

Food was brought out in waves. Plates of hard eggs, fruits and cheeses, and boiled vegetables were laid before them. Malcolm waved off the footman who plated his food, retrieved the opened bottle of wine, and poured heavily.

Today was going to be another very long day, he could already tell.

Chapter 8



Malcolm

The marquess watched his glass fill to the brim before replying to his mate. “My father is dead.”

“Oh.” Hrafn’s chin dropped, and her face fell. “I’m sorry. I . . . I hadn’t heard.”

Of course she hadn’t, out in the wilderness all on her own with no one but a trickster demon for company. More food followed, rolled in on carts and served generously. Ham and more boiled eggs, venison pies, and three sorts of jams. A jar of honey, a basket of muffins, soft white bread cut into thick slices, alongside a denser, nuttier loaf.

“How long were you there, guarding this cage?” he asked her, spearing cold ham and forking it onto his plate beside a tidy pile of eggs.

She pulled together her own smaller heap of food, ignoring the meat in favor of bread and jam and cheeses. “Just three centuries.”

The footman brought out a fine salted haddock, and she wrinkled her nose at it.

“*Just*,” he scoffed. Three centuries ago, Malcolm had traveled the Faelands, hunting bounties, fighting trolls, and bringing down interloping giants. He had been a soldier in a militia of sorts at the start of his career. But being a soldier was all discipline and marching. No adventure.

Without a war, there wasn't nearly enough fighting to keep him entertained. The moment his service ended, he'd left the Lunar Province for the Rasika mountains that had starred in all of his favorite war stories. Sewing his wild oats, his father had called it, certain his son would return to fulfill his duties when it was necessary.

Malcolm had, just not in time to see his father and mother before they were gone.

"I wasn't alone for all of it," Hrafn said, and Malcolm had to shut his eyes for a moment, squeezing out the feelings that had crept up his chest and into his throat.

"What happened to your clan?" he rasped, touching the side of his face to hide his expression, forcing his focus on her words.

"The Vanir have never been good at holding still." Hrafn stared at her glass. A sliver of sunlight broke through the nearest window, setting the color on fire. She took a breath, seemingly hesitant to say a negative word against her people. "It's our god-blood. I feel it too, the call to wander. I cannot fault them."

"For abandoning you and their post?" His laugh had no humor in it. He was no stranger to that same call, but he'd never abandon duty for it—not knowingly. "Yes, you can. You absolutely should fault them."

"When I was alone," Hrafn told him, running a finger over the rim of her glass, "I tried to scare trespassers off as best I could to keep them from tampering with things they shouldn't. Though the woods are large, it was simple at first, but then suddenly the humans were many. Before I knew it, the world was a very different place. The fields kept growing, consuming more trees, nearing that cage." Her sigh was forlorn. "It didn't matter in the end. The cage is broken. I—"

“Gods, don’t say *failed*. You did no such thing. A soldier abandoned on the front lines by his entire regiment doesn’t say he failed because he couldn’t hold back an onslaught single-handedly.” He chewed around a mouthful of food, shoveling in more to calm his rumbling belly.

Her gaze dropped. “At the prison, when the king asked me what happened, I couldn’t bring myself to tell him. Perhaps he would fault me.”

“Raven, a house is built with multiple support beams.” He used two columns of hard cheese to illustrate his point, resting a piece of bread along the top of it. He snatched one of the cheeses, popping it into his mouth, and the bread toppled, sliding off his plate. “When all but the one is destroyed, we don’t fault the last beam when the house collapses. The task was assigned to a clan for a reason. It wasn’t meant for one person to do alone. Look at me.” He waited for her eyes, and when he had them, he added sternly, “You’re not at fault.”

Hrafn’s lips parted, words fighting for purchase on her tongue. She worked her throat. When she met his gaze again, her fawn-colored eyes were glassy. “Thank you for saying that.”

On the table between them, her hand dropped open beside her cup, palm up. Malcolm imagined grasping that hand, linking his fingers with hers. The bond thrilled in his chest.

Before he could offer such a comfort, a tiny naked fairy-butt zoomed by his face, dripping tea into his wine. The mad flutter of Clapa’s wings sent more droplets into his eyes. She shook herself dry the way a wet dog might. He turned away from the onslaught.

Hrafn’s head went back, and laughter burst from her lips. Malcolm hadn’t seen the stoic warrior woman smile properly yet, let alone heard

her laugh. It was a husky, resonant sound, bellowing up from deep in her belly.

And it was absolutely magical.

Just looking at her, Solis said, my heart might burst . . . I know what you're thinking. Please don't ruin it.

Malcolm sighed, and the forlorn sound cut Hrafn's laughter short.

"What if I made your temporary cage here more comfortable?" he asked. "A larger room or a bigger bed, perhaps? Would you walk into it willingly then, or are you still determined to fight?"

She pushed her boiled potatoes around her plate with a fork. "After all you've seen today, you think I'm guilty?"

"I don't. I believe you were accused unjustly and I intended to write to my king to share what I've seen, but I'm not a magistrate, and you were ordered to be confined within these walls until you're vindicated."

"I'm within them," she said gruffly.

"But not confined." His voice hardened, a wall to defend himself against the temptation in her testing tone. He could learn to love battling with her.

"I was very clear before about how this would go for you," she said dryly, an unmistakably glint of excitement in those velvety brown eyes. "You cannot keep me."

He repressed the urge to meet the dare hidden in her words. Meeting the dare would require pulling her across the table and into his lap where he would do unspeakable things to her until she relented or orgasmed or both . . .

"If I let you wander freely," he growled, "you'll make a liar out of me. And if you're seen, we'll have more to deal with than some phantom-

monster.”

She flicked her fork flippantly at his words. “I’m not scared of farmers or their torches. Let them come.”

“I’m not either,” Malcolm said somberly. “What their unrest will bring down on us is what I’m frightened of. The king will come to keep the peace. He’ll speak death into your ears—both our ears, because I can’t bear to see you harmed. You’ll doom me as well.”

“You won’t guilt me into another cage, either,” she said, setting down her fork. She held up her palms like they were balanced scales. “You saved my neck yesterday. I saved your life today. My honor is secure.”

“You’d leave it at that between us?”

She met his gaze head-on. “I will see the monster destroyed. I owe you nothing more.”

“Your cage is a necessary precaution. Don’t be unreasonable. What if the king drops by to check on my progress?” Malcolm ground his teeth when she rolled her eyes dismissively. “If the king doesn’t deal with us himself, he’ll most assuredly send the Bloody Queen of Night. I know you’ve lived outside of society for a long while now. It’s unlikely you’ve heard the stories, but I’ve lived some of them, Raven. Suffice it to say, our queen earned that title. Her justice is swift, and she’d make quick work of both of us. You risk too much. You *will* be confined.”

Hrafn’s eyes widened, the fiery glint in her gaze made more prominent by the gaslights. “This queen sounds exactly like the sort of person I’d enjoy meeting.”

“I don’t want to fight—”

“Yes, you do,” she accused, and her lips quirked.

Oh, yes we do! Solis added. Beside the fireplace, he'd grown to twice his usual height.

Malcolm was kidding himself. The challenge. The call of adventure. The chance to prove he hadn't turned into a soft dandy just yet. Of course he wanted to fight with the Vanir warrior. The parts of him buried in lust wanted to touch as much of her as possible, whatever the reason. Another part of him just wanted the chance to grapple with one of the legendary beings from all his favorite childhood stories.

Malcolm twisted in his seat to face his soul. The little balls of shadow were done feasting on embers now. They rolled to and fro, bouncing into each other, leaving trails of blue behind them that smelled like rot. The inky trails evaporated quickly, but the scent lingered. *A room with a lot of sunlight should put them to sleep. Find one and watch over them there. I'll handle our mate.*

Diminished, Solis shrunk back down to his original size. He guided the train of rolling shadows out of the great hall. Now dressed, Clapa followed them, poking strays back in line and giggling when they spat at her. They left more smelly blue droplets on the floor behind them.

Ignoring Solis's grumbles over the stench, Malcolm waved off the nearest footman. "Leave this place for now. I'll ring for you if more is needed."

"Afraid I'll get carried away and hurt your servants while I'm trying to hurt you?" Hrafn asked.

"I'm more worried that *I* might." It had been a while since he'd had a reason to fight. He waited for the servant to leave the great hall before he turned back to his plate. He didn't have to wait long; the footman moved hurriedly.

“This is going to hurt,” she whispered, and her mouth curved in its subtle way. “But I’ll try not to break anything.”

“Are you referring to my bones or my things?”

“Bones. All your things are fair game.”

Malcolm forked a bit of boiled egg into his mouth and chewed aggressively. “The moment you finish your food, I’m hauling you back upstairs. By your wings or your hair if I have to.”

“Hm. Good to know.” Hrafn bit off a corner of toast and chewed it slowly.

They ate together in charged silence, shooting one another fleeting glares. He brought his second glass of wine to his lips and sipped. She poked half-heartedly at her food.

Her foot hooked around the leg of his chair. The sudden movement startled him. She jerked it forward, toppling Malcolm backward in his seat. He landed on the floor with a crash, overturning his plate. Hrafn leapt over the table, shattering glass, knocking over the cart of refreshments. She landed gracefully, boots planted beside his head. Tea and wine followed her down, dripping in rivulets over the wooden edge.

Malcolm grabbed for her leg, but she was quick. She kicked him in the chest, sending him sprawling. Rubbing at the ache her boot print left in his sternum, he surged to his feet. Hrafn leapt up, wings beating at the air, pushing her higher.

Using the table as leverage, Malcolm vaulted after her. Snagging her by her legs, he used his greater weight to haul her down onto the floor. They rolled and wrestled over the cold tiles. She threw an elbow into his gut. He jerked on her braids.

“You’re my prisoner. I’m your lord. You’ll go where I tell you to,” he rumbled.

“You’re smiling,” she fired back. “All your commands would mean more if you weren’t grinning like a fool.”

Stars above, he hadn’t meant to make his enjoyment so plain, but he was in fact having the time of his life. This was better than fighting giants or catching bounties or chasing pretty girls in long skirts. Hrafn’s tight, lean muscles snapped and coiled in well-trained blows. Her reflexes were fast as lightning strikes, and she didn’t pull her punches.

Trapping her under the weight of his body, he caught her next swing, pinning her arm to his side. Hrafn head-butted him in the chin, disorienting him. Then she bucked her hips and sent him rolling off of her, onto his back. Propelling herself to her feet with a flex of her great wings, she made another attempt to get airborne. Malcolm scrambled up, knees smarting. He charged after her and caught her midflight at the archway of the great hall. The flap of her wings created a gale that nearly knocked him off his feet, but he held her around the waist and didn’t let go.

Hrafn tried knocking him loose by ramming him into a row of chairs. Malcolm caught the corner of the nearest empty table with his legs, and he used the leverage to jerk her down toward the ground. She landed on the balls of her feet and twisted free of him. Her wings snapped straight, striking him in the neck and shoulder. Her fist flew toward his cheek in a fluid combo. He lifted his arm to block it, falling for the feint. She dropped the punch, plucking a glistening blade out of her tall boot, and slashed.

Malcolm’s breath caught. He looked down. He felt no pain and saw no blood. Then his belt parted and the fall front of his trousers dropped open.

Malcolm caught his pants as they slipped around his hips.

“Did you open my trousers for inspection?” he grunted. “Or to trip me?”

Her response was a breathy laugh that quickened his pulse.

“Both, then,” he guessed.

He lunged for her. Letting his trousers slip down his thighs, he grappled her to the ground. They exchanged modest blows, but neither landed them with any real effect—their proximity didn’t allow for it. He managed to pin her wriggling body under his weight, wrenching the knife from her fingers. When he had command of it, he made a swipe of his own, straight down the fastenings of her leather pants.

They could both fall over their clothes now.

She hooked her hands behind his neck, pulling him forward. Then she bowed her back and flipped them, claiming the dominant position, straddling his abdomen. With her boot, she trapped his hand that still clutched her blade, pressing it into the tile floor. Her eyes found his, and they shared several heavy breaths, both winded.

Her wings unfurled, black as night and equally glorious. Not a threat display. It reminded him of their first encounter, and he paused his next assault. There was deeper meaning in the gesture. Meaning he hadn’t understood then but was beginning to understand now.

It was an invitation.

Her hand went to his chest. She pressed it flat over his heart and her breathing stuttered, feathers ruffled as her wings dropped behind her.

“So that’s what that is,” she said, his heart kicking against her palm. “The bond. It pulses in my chest. But I see now. I can feel it. That pulse, it’s your heart. Your heart beating beside mine.” She brought her nose

closer to his, her braids spilling around her face. Her cheeks were flushed. “Do you feel it?”

Yes. Gods yes, there was only that thumping pulse. Only her and the bond and all the points at which his body touched hers. Everything else fell away.

“I know you don’t want to be in a cage, but you can’t leave here. You can’t be seen. Raven, if anyone saw you . . .” He shook his head. “I would be every kind of evil thing I had to be to keep anything from happening to you. Don’t push me there.”

Malcolm dropped the knife. Hrafn released his wrist, lifting her foot and tucking it under her. He grabbed for her hair, only this time, instead of grappling with her, he pulled her lips to his. They kissed with the same bruising passion they’d fought with. Her tongue flicked between his lips, and he opened for her, matching caress for caress, exploring and claiming and being claimed.

Her sigh heated his skin, and her wings fluttered, a sign of her arousal as compelling as the delicious sounds humming through her throat.

Her wings came around them like a silken cocoon, sheathing them in ebony. Her breath blew against his cheek in hot pulls. He nibbled her lip, squeezing her wriggling body to his chest. Holding her was like trying to trap lightning in a barrel. She pulsed with an energy that fell somewhere between violence and passion with no equal measure.

His fingers roved down her back and over the rounded curves of her ass. Her leathers were different. Something hand-stitched and buttery soft. Newly made. High quality.

Was this the finest clothing she had? He suspected it was. Something she didn’t wear for just any occasion certainly. Had she put them on that

morning just for him?

I came back because I had unfinished business, she'd said. Was her business more than the monster? Was *he* that unfinished business?

She kicked off her boots. As he raked his fingers down her trousers, he refrained from damaging them further. The linen drawers beneath he had no sympathy for. He ripped seams without a care, eager to see more bronze skin flushed with her arousal. He found the fastenings at her back next, loosening the fitted cotton that worked as a barrier between her flesh and the armor she'd bloodied earlier.

She wore no underthings to conceal her small breasts. Her nipples, the same fawn color as her eyes, hardened to pebbles, and every hair on his arm stood to attention. He rolled his thumbs over the textured skin that circled the peak of each breast, and her back arched into his touch. The dark plaits of her hair spilled over her shoulders, lush rivers of woven night long enough to brush over his abdomen.

Stripped bare, she shifted to straddle his hips, then sat back on the hard bulge of his erection. Separated only by the thin fabric of his drawers, he felt the heat of her sex and his cock throbbed. He rolled his hips, exploring that sensuous warmth, and she moved to meet him, pleasuring herself.

The sway of her body was intoxicating. The heat coursing between them and through him went molten. Gripping her waist, he bit down on his lip, already over-sensitized to every supple, sweet grind of her body against his. The sharp bite of his own teeth served to calm him somewhat, a trick he hadn't needed since he was a fledgling, but he was drowning in the blooming bond.

And in her.

Gods, she was using his body like a tool, and he'd never been gladder to be of service. He wanted to encourage her to do it more, move *more*, but his mouth had gone entirely dry. Her eyes slid closed. Her breasts bounced slightly with the gentle sway of her hips, rubbing that sweet bud at the apex of her sex against the tender head of his cock.

The smell of her arousal was heady. It thickened in his nose. He wanted to bury his face in that glorious scent, wanted to taste of her until she was screaming and sated, wanted to thoroughly get acquainted with the dark curls there and every other inch of her intimate flesh.

The image sank into his thoughts, and a moan fell from him. His balls tightened. One of her hands rested on his chest for balance, fisting in his shirt; another slid behind her to tease the sensitive sac beneath his cock. She glided over him, wet heat dampening the thin fabric barrier.

Her lips parted around a sensuous breath. The smallest whimper escaped her throat. And Malcolm gritted his teeth, the urge to finish pulsing through his pelvis, and they hadn't even gotten started yet.

Oh, but the noises he would draw out of her when he pulled her up his body and sat her down on his face and . . .

She teased his balls. His hips jerked forward, and with a groan he finished right there in his tattered trousers.

"Sacred stars." He blinked the blur out of his vision as waves of bliss rattled through him and his blood pressure bottomed out. "I swear to the divines, I'm never done that quickly."

She chuckled, but there wasn't even the hint of mockery in it. Just contentment and pride. The same he'd feel for her the moment he brought her to release. Again and again and again.

Fighting against the sudden feeling of drowsiness, he gripped her thighs and yanked her up his chest. "I couldn't stop thinking about tasting you, and it was the end of me. Closer now. I need you on my tongue."

Hrafn scooted into place until her knees cradled the sides of his head. She lowered herself gently over his face, too gently. She was small in stature, and he wasn't so fragile. The unexpected caution from this warrior woman amused him.

Malcolm cupped her ass in encouragement. Fondling the soft orbs, he squeezed them hard and seated her sweet pussy firmly against his lips, showing her he could handle all of her weight. His tongue flicked out against the furrow of her sex. With nose and lips he teased her, soaking in the whimpers and keens she gifted him.

Her thighs clenched around him. Then she seemed to remember herself and started to lift her body to lighten the load. He pinched her ass and held her in place, lapping and licking his fill. The drumbeat of their growing bond thundered beside his heart. Her pleasure was nectar to him, salty and sweet, and her moans and sighs were bliss.

When she forgot herself, forgot to try to be careful, her hips moved in rhythmic jerks over his lips, and she grew louder. Pressure built in his pelvis. His spent cock stirred. She was close, but he wasn't nearly done yet. He slid his tongue inside her satiny entrance, moving his attention just south of where she needed him. In and out, he made love to her with his tongue.

Hrafn grunted her frustration, and her hands gripped his antlers, steering him north. He smiled against her sensitive flesh, then he blew over her sex, teasing her. Her grumpy little growl in response was music to his ears.

He adored her touch at the base of that intimately fae part of him. His tail slapped out excitedly, striking the floor and rebounding before he wrapped it around her leg. Gone was the cautious, gentle sway of her hips. She ground herself against his lips and tongue, and his cock hardened to granite.

“Oh gods, oh fuck. Oh, fuck me,” she panted and then her words transformed, slipping from a melodious Olden into some vulgar mixture of their languages. Moaned curses and panted praises, some familiar, some he didn’t know, but they were all for him.

Magnificent nonsense.

Her thighs shook, intimate flesh quivering under his tongue. Hrafn’s strangled sob topped off the crescendo of her release. She pitched forward, fingers tightening around his antlers for balance.

Holding her around the waist, he scooted her limp body back down his chest, where she collapsed against him. Tamed and tended to, her cheek nestled over his heart. Hrafn nosed at his shirt buttons, searching for the best place to rest her ear, and the sleepy movement made him think of a napping kitten. The low hum in her throat wasn’t unlike a purr.

Oh, but he wasn’t done yet. He bucked gently, prodding her hip with the throbbing bulge in his drawers, a warning that more was to come.

He sat them upright, cradling her. As he rose to his feet, she wrapped her legs around his waist and clung to him. She nuzzled his throat and unshaven jaw, sapped of the violent energy that usually thrummed somewhere under her skin. Her wings drooped down her back.

His gentle kitten. He smiled at the thought.

Malcolm supported her weight, cupping the cheeks of her ass, carrying her naked toward the archway of the great hall.

Then he changed his mind. He wasn't going to make it up all those stairs just now, not as rock hard as he was. Malcolm sat her down on the end of the nearest table, fitting himself between her spread thighs, prodding gently at her wet heat.

He didn't spare a thought for who might walk into the room. Like the old gods, he didn't care.

"Do you want to come again, my deadly little bird?" he said into her hair. One of her braids had pulled loose.

"Hm," she hummed drowsily, "not possible so soon."

"Oh, but I love a good challenge," he said quietly, his lips skimming the shell of her ear. "I'll be careful of your wings. Will you turn around for me?"

Another low thoughtful hum, and her wings fluttered like they knew they were being discussed. "No, I want to watch you."

Hooking his hands under her knees, he spread her wide on the edge of that table. Shifting his thicker body up to the cradle of her thighs, he encouraged her to wrap her legs around him. With her help, Malcolm shifted his drawers down, freeing himself. She fisted him, guiding him to where she wanted him. As he sunk slowly into her, she pushed up his shirt, pinning it high so she could see all. Together they watched his length ease inside her satin channel, inch by inch.

When he was fully seated, they shared a long, pleasure-filled groan. Her breasts grazed his abdomen. She dropped her brow on his chest and watched him work in and out of her, steady thrust after steady thrust, her breaths creating a balmy humidity, her wings flittering gently. Intimate muscles squeezed him tight, sucking him in.

"Mm, look how well you take your mate," she purred.

He loved her praise, but he wanted her witless, wanted her begging and whimpering and as completely incoherent as she had been before. He cupped her breasts, then worked his palm down the valley of her belly. He circled her navel before delving lower, exploring that sweet place that made her senseless with the pad of his thumb.

“There,” she panted. “Good boy.”

He stroked her in small rapid circles, and her head fell back. Malcolm pumped into her body, rocking her so hard he rattled the table. Her lashes feathered her cheeks, and she was lost again. Head lolling, knees gripping his sides. She crossed her ankles behind him, pulling him closer. Cheek on his chest, she dug her fingers into his back and hair with a desperation that sent him spiraling, pressure building in his pelvis and tightening his balls. Her wings came around them in a feathery hug, the silken plumes a gentle contrast to the pinpricks of her nails.

Olden spilled from her lips when she came, and the only word he understood in the mix was, “Malcolm.”

He kissed the top of her head and tasted the salt on her gleaming skin. “Tell me where you want me to spend.”

“Inside me,” she rasped.

Malcolm delved deeper, rising up on his toes with growing urgency. He saw sparks burst before his eyes as he emptied himself. When he finished, they leaned against each other as their pulses slowed and the bond warmed between them.

The gentle nuzzling kitten had returned and was all that remained for now of his fierce warrior woman. He laid his brow against hers, a fae sign of great affection. Moving his hands under her knees to support her

weight, he pulled out of her, then kept her spread wide for a moment. Just long enough to watch his mark on her glide down her glossy sex.

He righted what he could of his wrecked clothing. His destroyed belt hung uselessly. He'd take her upstairs now, though that erotic image of her spread out for him like a feast on the table was guaranteed to make it necessary for at least one more detour along the way.

Maybe two. There were a lot of stairs.

Chapter 9



Hrafn

Hrafn lay on her side in her mate's bed. Facing him, she allowed her wings to droop comfortably off the mattress. Still restless from their aerobic entanglements earlier, her wings flickered occasionally, a happy little pulse behind her.

Malcolm lay on his back, one arm tucked behind his head, the other resting over his stomach. She'd gotten him out of his clothes eventually so they could wash together. The bond had enjoyed the shared intimacy of that nearly more so than the lovemaking.

She needed to be more careful with such things. Malcolm was a lord and this was his home. But she didn't belong here anymore. Completing the bond, forming a true mate connection to this good man, would destroy her. She'd be pulled one way by her god-blood and another entirely by her mate.

With a corner of bedsheet, Malcolm covered the parts of him most sensitive to the open air in the drafty room. He recited Olden parables for her amusement. His tail tickled her naked thigh, demanding her attention.

"Let's see," he thought aloud. "Oh, there's, 'never let gold be your guide.' How has that one changed over the years?"

She shook her head, playing her fingers drowsily through the tuft of hair on the end of his affectionate tail. “It’s goat.”

His white brows furrowed. “Never let a goat be your guide . . . ? There’s wisdom in that, I suppose but— You’re teasing me.”

“I am.” She felt her mouth tugging up into a grin. Her cheeks hurt, unaccustomed to so much laughter and smiling.

Malcolm shifted to his side, scooted in closer, and her breath caught. She should be accustomed to his nearness by now, but her lungs turned uncooperative anyway. His tail wound around her leg, stopping just shy of her more intimate places.

“I’m nourished by your smiles. They’re rare and hard-earned. Like a diamond.” He brushed his knuckles across her cheeks. “I think I could live off of them and not need another thing.”

“Not a thing?” she teased. “Not food or air or water? And what of the rest of me?”

“The rest of you is a feast. One I intend to indulge in regularly.”

She leaned in to meet his kiss. His lips were gentle and familiar, brushing against hers. His tongue delved into her mouth with unhurried strokes.

Hrafn felt it in her broken soul when her familiar entered the room. She gave her mate one last, hard kiss, then separated. “We’re not alone,” she warned.

Malcolm pulled the sheet up over them both.

A large black moth had flown in through the crack between the door and floor. It circled overhead, smelling of sulfur.

I spotted no sign of the monster or his spawn, Ezra grumbled, not that you seem the least bit worried about that at the moment. Or about me . . .

“Well done, Ezra,” she said soothingly. “Thank you for keeping a look-out.”

And now you’re doing that funny thing with your teeth.

Hrafn touched her mouth, surprised to find it once again in a merry slant. *I’m smiling because I’m happy to see you.*

Pfft.

“Yes, thank you for your service,” Malcolm said, not sounding at all enthused. “Now, please go away.”

Hrafn threw an elbow into his gut, eliciting a grunt. “Make yourself comfortable, Ezra. You’ve been gone for hours. I’m sure you’re tired.”

No thank you, the familiar said. I’d rather be someplace where everyone is wearing clothes, not bedsheets. I think I’ll go see what the feral little fairy is up to.

The moth made one last fluttering lap about the room before gliding back under the door.

“You offended his honor,” Hrafn said, resisting half-heartedly as her mate pulled her against the broad expanse of his chest, bathing her in his heat.

“I’ll make it up to him later. Right now, I want to spend the entire day in bed with you.”

“But we have,” she said, pointing behind her to the dusky slivers of sunlight pouring in through the window.

“Have we?” He nosed at her neck, skimming his lips along her throat, and her belly swooped. “It went by so quickly, I hadn’t noticed.”

“Aren’t you hungry?” she breathed, lungs hitching. “We haven’t eaten in hours.”

“I’ve been feasting all day,” he purred.

“It did go by quickly,” she admitted, sinking against him. He was deliciously warm and so attentive.

His strong hands skated down her back, between the sensitive sinew that separated the blades of her shoulders from her wings, and muscles in her belly clenched. “It could be like this all the time, Raven,” he said. “You and me.”

Hrafn’s heart plummeted. Planting a hand high on his sternum, she stiffened in his arms. “Oh, Malcolm . . .”

He sucked in a breath. “Don’t say my name like that.”

“You seemed to enjoy it when I said your name before,” she noted sweetly, trying to soften the blow.

He shook his head, eyes sliding shut. “Shout my name in ecstasy all you like, but don’t ever say it in that pitying tone.”

Hrafn rubbed her thumb over the sprinkling of ashen hair on his chest, trying to soothe the damage of the words that remained unsaid. She inhaled deeply, and her lungs faltered again. “I’m so sorry.”

Malcolm took her hand in his and gripped it. “Don’t be sorry. *Stay.*”

“How can I when I’ve grown to *hate* this place?” Hrafn’s throat went tight. Her next words pitched higher in her efforts to squeeze them out. “I’ve been trapped here for so very long. All I’ve dreamed of in that time is a chance to finally be free of it.”

“I know I haven’t been in your life long, but . . . Raven, you’re all I want. One look at you and that was all I needed. There was a lifetime in just a glance from you. Two lifetimes in your death threats.”

Her eyes stung. She had to close them to keep them from watering. Her lip trembled. “You belong here, and I don’t.”

“You belong with me.” His hold on her hand tightened. “I’m certain of it.”

“You could come with me, then,” she said, knowing the words were hollow. “We are Vanir. We aren’t meant to stay in one place forever.”

“I . . .” His mouth fell open. He made a sound that nearly resembled words, then he closed it again. “This is my father’s estate. My father’s people. My duty is to them now.”

“I know,” she whispered. “It’s impossible.”

“Don’t say that—just stop saying words. Stop thinking. Just be with me. Feel with me—”

“When the monster is gone, I have to leave.” Her voice firmed. “I need you to understand that. I need you not to get in the way.”

“I said stop,” he grumbled. “Gods.” He ran a hand through his hair, mussing the strands along the base of his antlers. His eyes went red-rimmed. “You’re not even willing to try. You might be happy with me here. I’m your mate. We could complete the bond and find our peace together.”

Hrafn rolled away from him, staring at the ceiling. The room seemed colder now, the growing dark outside the window oppressive because it was a thief, stealing their time away. As the sun dipped lower, that dreaded last goodbye inched closer.

“I know exactly how it would be,” she said. “I’ve experienced it before with my clan. We watched the cage together that first century. But as the second neared, one by one my kin left to see the world. To explore. To adventure. To feed the need in their god-blood.”

“They abandoned you here. I never would—”

“Shh. They all left until only myself and my father remained.”

“Your father,” he groaned like he’d already lost.

“My dearest friend. My beloved father and commander. We fought in wars together. Two and a half centuries we guarded that damn cage, protecting it from curious animals and wandering mortals, watching the world change around us. And then the bickering started.”

Malcolm rolled onto his back. His silence as he stared broodily up at the ceiling was loud, but he didn’t interrupt her. He honored her by listening.

“There were times when I thought there was no one in the world I could ever love so much while also hating them *so much*.” Her laugh was breathy and bitter. “There were moments I wanted to stab him, I was so tired of him, and we’d never had reason to be at odds before then. We’d never been so cramped, so unhappy.”

“You’ll need to travel sometimes to keep from feeling caged in,” Malcolm said. “I would understand—”

She pressed a finger to his lips. “We thought of that too. We needed space. Needed a chance to explore, so we’d take turns, we said. But that was the beginning of the end.” She let her hand drop from his lips to glide down his body, stopping at the place above his heart. The thrum of the bond beat in sync with that strong, steady organ. “We took turns, and each time it got harder and harder to come back. Each time we were a little later, then even later the next . . . Then there was a moment when I thought my father might never return.”

Malcolm made an aggressive sound low in his throat. “Please tell me he came back.”

“He did.” A tear broke from the corner of her eye and slid down toward her ear, soaking in her hair. She brushed her cheek clean hastily. “He

looked better. Happier. Stronger. He wanted me to come with him. Begged me to. He told me that our time here was over, but . . .”

“Honor,” Malcolm finished for her.

“Honor,” she agreed. “I sent him off with my blessing. As long as one of the Vanir remained, our honor would be intact, I thought.”

“Your honor certainly is,” Malcolm said.

She turned her head to peer at him in the growing night. Shadows fell over his face, darkening one of his eyes, and hollowing his cheek. It gave him a haunted expression that she was certain would cling to her memory for ages to come. Hrafn curled her body back in toward his heat, twisting in the sheets. “I was angry with him at first, but I’m not anymore. He deserved to be happy. And now so do I.”

Malcolm reached for her. Finding her cheek in the dark, he cupped it. “You deserve that,” he said, and his voice was gravel. “I just wish that thing that brought you such happiness was *me*.”

“I’m glad my father left for himself. I hope he’s out there now traveling and seeing the world. Or he’s died honorably with a sword in his hand. That would be wonderful too. And I’m glad I stayed.” Hrafn lowered her brow to Malcolm’s in that ancient gesture of fae intimacy. “Because it brought me to you. I will cherish this time with you always.”

That was apparently more than Malcolm could take. He pulled away from her. Sitting up, his feet hit the rug with an echoing thud. He sat there for a moment, head bowed, white hair hiding his face.

He stood, not looking at her, and paced to the door.

“Malcolm,” she said cautiously, “I do hope you’re not going to bother with locks tonight.”

“No locks,” he said gruffly. All the warmth that had been in his voice, his touch, his gaze, it was gone now. A new darkness entered the room. It gathered from under the door, growing into the shadow she recognized. “For now, you’re still a prisoner here, Hrafn of the Vanir. Locks can’t keep you, but my soul can.”

* * *

Hrafn tried to sleep that night, alone in a lord’s bed with no company. She’d made a shift of sorts for herself out of one of Malcolm’s shirts, tearing it in places without remorse.

Served him right, leaving her here under guard.

Her mate’s other half cast a dark shade that wandered to and fro on the other side of the door, but Solis remained unintrusive. If she was being honest, she wanted to be intruded upon. She wanted to be near her mate for as long as she could. She’d welcome the company of his shadow form.

The goodbye would be upon them soon enough, but it wasn’t tonight. Why did either of them need to be alone now?

Out of that pacing darkness, under the crack in the door, a black moth crawled up the frame. Hrafn sighed her relief. She wouldn’t have to be alone after all.

The moth grew into an inky cloud before transforming into Ezra’s usual hawk-like form. He glided to the chair opposite the bed and perched on the back of it.

Why did you eat his face? Ezra asked.

Hrafn blinked at him, crossing to him tentatively. The oversized shirt billowed around her. “I beg your pardon?”

Your mouth on your mate's mouth. Were you hungry?

“Oh! No. It's called a kiss. It's . . . an expression of great affection.” She'd met Ezra during the war. He hadn't had a chance to see Hrafn smile much in their time together since then. He'd certainly never seen her kiss anyone. She'd been too chained to duty to seek out lovers in the way she had before, when she was younger and could afford to be reckless.

Malcolm was the perfect partner to finally break her fast on. Attentive and imaginative. Tender when it called for it. Rough when she wanted that. Her toes curled against the rug just thinking about the bliss he'd inspired.

Ezra's head twisted sharply to the side, aiming one inky eye at her. *You don't feel affection for me?*

Recognizing the hurt in his voice, Hrafn contained the urge to laugh. “Of course I feel affection for you.” Her voice wobbled with amusement. “You've become dear to me, Ezra.”

You've never once tried to eat my face. I would remember.

Twisting up her mouth, Hrafn schooled her expression. “You're right. I'm sorry.” She leaned forward and brushed her lips gently across his beak. He smelled acrid.

Ezra's chest puffed out, feathers ruffling. He turned his head side to side contemplatively.

“Is that better?” she asked, straightening to her full height.

I don't know. Are kisses always so boring?

Hrafn pushed him off his perch. He took flight with a squawk, swooping once around the room before landing again on the back of the chair.

“Damn you,” she chuckled. “But thank you. Your silly questions are making me feel better.”

Are you sick?

“Just sad.” She rubbed at the space above her heart. “It’s like a sickness in my feelings.”

He snorted at her. *I know what sadness is. I don’t like it when you’re sad.*

“Aw. That’s nice, Ezra.”

Head bobbing, he paced side to side on the back of the chair, talons clicking against the wood. *I don’t like it because I can feel it in the piece of soul you gave me. It’s unpleasant.*

She frowned at him. “That’s less nice, Ezra.”

His feathers ruffled. He studied her again in that bird-like way of his, one eye at a time, head twisting side to side. *Would you like me to sleep on the bed with you tonight?*

The offer warmed her. Hrafn truly was the most violent sleeper. The link of their souls enjoyed being close, but not even that comfort was worth her restless thrashing and kicking. That he would dare it now just to soothe her was a kindness she wouldn’t soon forget.

“No,” she said softly. “But thank you, my friend. Good night.”

Hrafn climbed back into bed, aware of aches in intimate places. The pleasant throb brought to mind the bed sport that had caused them—bed sport and table sport and floor sport and stairs sport . . . A new, different ache made itself known, and her heart squeezed.

“Careful now, Hrafn,” she scolded herself. Crossing her arms over her chest, she guarded the part of her that had the most to lose.

* * *

Hrafn punched the headboard and awoke when the wood splintered. Her knuckles smarted. She hadn't used proper form and now her thumb was throbbing. She sat up in bed, hoping to find her familiar close by, but the room was empty. The blankets were knotted messes on the floor. Her thrashing had likely disturbed Ezra, and he'd retreated to seek his rest elsewhere.

Not his fault, but a disappointment all the same.

Her mouth was dry. The burn of loneliness worked its way up her throat, stinging her nose and eyes. The first tears that broke free were hot on her cheeks. Her vision blurred.

Bathed in moonlight, movement drew her eye to the door. The shadowy form of her mate floated there, ethereal and intimidating. She swallowed hard.

"Malcolm . . ." In the bond, she felt the slow, steady thump of his heart slumbering in some other room. Her next breath was a shuddery whimper. This was Solis, she recalled, but she also knew better. He may go by another name at times, but this being was her mate. This was Malcolm. He'd told her as much in the prison. Malcolm was Solis. Solis was Malcolm.

He came to her side first in a glide. Then as he grew more solid, footsteps landed gently on the rug. She felt his weight shift the mattress.

"I'm sorry," she told his soul, air rattling in her lungs. "I hate that I've hurt you. I really, really hate it."

The shadowy arms came around her without accusation, without judgement. These caresses were somehow more intimate than anything they'd done in the daylight, more profound. She explored his form with

tentative care, first his hair, then the front of his clothing, and for the moment she forgot that her heart was breaking.

It was all an illusion. He felt the same everywhere, warm and solid and velvety soft. But his touch didn't feel like skin, and his hair didn't feel like hair. His body wasn't covered in fabric. He was just shadows. Just soul. Just darkness and sweet pressure. Malcolm's tail unfurled, winding up her leg in that way it seemed to favor.

But then it just kept winding, tendrils growing longer and longer, wrapping her thigh in a downward spiral, over her knee, then her calf.

She let him comfort her, let him pull her close, pillowing her cheek on the velvety expanse that made his body. There was no heartbeat, just the steady thump of the bond inside her.

Hrafn wrinkled the edges of her oversized shirt. "I wish things were different. I really do . . ."

Malcolm pressed a shadowy finger to her lips. Then he caught one of her tears that had escaped, and he held it before her. The single drop glittered in the starlight. He put it in his mouth and sucked on it. Then he pressed those dark lips over hers. Pressure and softness and warmth. He tasted like night air. He laid them down on the bed together, on their sides.

Her wings gave a nervous flutter. Malcolm reached out and stroked the carpal edge. The shadowy fingers seemed to move on instinct. Warm pressure brushed over each plume, following them to the bend in the appendage. Gods, it felt good. She extended the wing to encourage his exploration.

His tail was moving again, coiling and uncoiling along her leg, stroking up and down the sensitive inner skin of her thighs.

The shadows expanded until she couldn't see through them. She could only feel. Fingers brushed over her wings. Touches plucked at her buttons, pulling open her shirt. That wicked tail grew more daring. Hot pressure pushed between her legs. She opened to the invasion as tendrils of thick living shadow teased her flesh. Pleasure pooled there, and Malcolm spread the moisture from the top of her sex to her back entrance.

Hrafn blinked, disoriented by the complete dark. A kiss of satiny softness brushed over her eyelids comfortingly, and she relented, allowing herself to be stroked, to be tended to by this man of shadow that was all hands, all touch. She reached for him and felt more softness, more pressure stroking the pulse at her wrists, wrapping them in that mystery velvet, and pulling her arms wide, opening her to him. Malcolm's hands cupped her thighs, then spread her legs, and his tail pushed farther inside her willing body.

Her back bowed, taking him deeper while more touch, more pressure, teased her ass. Fingers of shadow stroked between the crease of her backside, exploring the sensitive flesh without penetrating it. Her shirt was pulled open and pushed off her shoulders. Flickers of heat lapped at her exposed nipple.

And then he was moving over her, rocking her body, brushing heat against the needy bud at the crest of her thighs while finding sweet places inside her with those tendrils of darkness.

"Yes," she whispered. She was climbing higher. The peak of pleasure was in sight, nearly in her grasp. A shiver broke out along her abdomen. Just a little further now . . .

And then Malcolm slowed down again. His tail began to retreat from her body. Her aching clit was abandoned.

“Don’t you dare,” she growled. “You terrible tease.”

She *felt* his amusement, the trickster, and she pouted at him.

Then all at once the pressure was back again. His mouth claimed hers. His tail filled her aching pussy to bursting. He shook the bed with his thrusts, and still the tender touches continued stroking her wings; teasing fingers at her backside played with her. He palmed both of her breasts until all of her was covered in satiny darkness. Hrafn rose to meet him, feeling plundered and glad for it.

When she orgasmed, her back left the bed. Her wings flared. She cursed in three languages—one of which was an invention of her own created right there in that moment. The tendrils shrank from her body, his tail retreated, returning to his usual size and shape, a replica of her mate in every way.

He put her bed back together, gathering the blankets and tucking her in, and then he climbed under them with her.

The shadows weren’t afraid of her thrashing, she realized. She could be as violent as she needed to be with them.

“Thank you, Malcolm,” she whispered to the dark.

The dark whispered back in a voice so faint she couldn’t make out the words, but they soothed her anyway.

Chapter 10



Malcolm

Malcolm awoke from a vivid dream of bedding his mate. A dream that wasn't a dream—not entirely. Waking with a stiff cock wasn't so unusual. Waking up rock hard, sac full and aching, certainly was.

Solis floated into the room then, looking smug.

“You fucked her,” Malcolm accused. “Without me.”

You fucked her first, without me, Solis snapped.

“It wasn't planned. It just happened.” Malcolm adjusted himself as his soul lounged beside him on the bed.

My time with her wasn't planned either. She needed comforting, so I went to her. Perhaps we should make a deal. We fuck her together from now on.

“Deal,” Malcolm grunted.

She's . . . sad.

Malcolm ran a hand down his face. “I know.” He hated it. Hated duty and the burden of keeping his word, the burden that would hold him stationary while his mate responded finally to the call of her god-blood. He'd cast it all off if he could.

It tears at me, her sadness. But we could just keep her, yes? We don't have to let her go.

“Maybe we can change her mind, but I can’t keep her prisoner forever.” He rubbed the grit from his eyes. “I need to think about all of it and figure out what to do.”

I can’t bear her melancholy. Leaving us makes her sad, so we just keep her. Then she won’t be sad.

“Holding her in a cage would make her hate us. If we were smart, we’d send her away now to a place where angry mobs may never reach her and deal with the king ourselves. This is our land. The monster is our responsibility. And if we wait any longer for her to leave us, that pain will only grow. Hope could make us desperate. You especially so.”

No, Solis whimpered. Not yet. We want her with us. At least let her stay while she’s willing!

“I need to ponder every outcome and pick the one that is best for us, for our mate, for our people. You only ever act on sentiment, always thinking with your heart or your cock. There’s no in-between. Just like . . .” He let the words he didn’t want to dwell on fall away, but of course his soul knew them anyway. There had been a time when he listened to Solis always.

You still haven’t forgiven me for that, have you? Solis said somberly.

Malcolm scratched at the scruff on his chin. He’d missed his morning shave yesterday, thanks to the attack on the fortress. “I thought we should visit home more. But you said—”

Our parents are immortal. They aren’t going anywhere, Solis remembered. Malcolm had given him a name after that. He couldn’t bear thinking of his soul as entirely himself anymore. That would mean he was just as responsible for the bad choices they’d made.

“We drank and chased giants and every skirt that smiled at us while our mother watched her true mate slip into madness and die here in these walls. Alone. Then she succumbed to the mate sickness. *Alone.*” But of course, he *was* just as responsible.

Her letters finally reached him in the Rasika Mountains of the Unseelie Provinces. The first letter explained that one of her father’s phantoms had gotten the better of him—his mother had never trusted those creatures born of shadow and fire with only one clear purpose: whisper wicked madness into the ears of others. But father’s god blood made him reckless. He kept the creatures as guards, enjoying the challenge. The notes following detailed the growing madness in her husband. She had to move him from their manor at Reedholm to the fortress to keep him away from people he could hurt.

He’d attacked her on the way, injured his own true mate. Malcolm should have been there, should have helped his mother bring him to Skugborg, but when Malcolm made it home, his mother and father had already been buried.

If these words do not find you in time, know that you are precious to us now and always. Be happy, my son, his mother had said in her final farewell. He could tell by the faintness of the handwriting that she was weakening as she wrote it. Her true mate was gone. Her heart had lost its reason for beating.

Solis lay beside him in the bed in the same position, shoulder to shoulder, shadowy head on the adjacent pillow, hands folded over his stomach, tail stretched out alongside his leg.

“Walk the stars in eternal peace,” Malcolm said to the ceiling, a prayer he’d prayed thousands of times before, “and know that, although I failed to

act like it, you were precious to me, too.”

Now and always, Solis said.

* * *

Malcolm spent the next week avoiding his mate. First, he dutifully distracted himself, writing letter after letter, detailing the events of their first days at the fortress for the King of Night. He paid Clapa in silver buttons, a ribbon, a piece of string, and a silk handkerchief to deliver his missives. With her speed and her ability to grow and shrink her size, she conveyed his messages in half the time a human courier could.

The other letters, he sent to the neighboring estates—Dagrun next door, and the Lord and Lady of Whiteholm in the South—warning them of the darkness that disturbed the woods. He explained the nature of phantoms. The creature would nest and would attack anything that posed a threat or came too close. He sent further warnings to all his land stewards and the elders in Reedlet, advising that he was seeing to the monster, but that the matter would take some time to resolve, and that no one should go near the old forests in the meantime. He crafted rudimentary maps of the location in the woods south of the fortress and west of Reedlet.

Even as he wrote his letters, his mind drifted to the warrior witch. In the pit of his gut, he knew he would soon lose her. Further down, in his deepest depths, he knew he deserved that, so he threw himself into training next, distracting his thoughts from the inevitable goodbye that would crush him. He prepped his body to take on the phantom using powers that desperately needed tuning.

Solis guarded Hrafn's bed at night—or he was supposed to—but that failed to stop her from escaping each day, forcing Malcolm to wait until she'd settled in for the night before adding locks and reinforcements to her door. None of his efforts kept her put, and he couldn't figure out why.

Late that morning, as Malcolm slipped on his leather training gear, he scolded his soul for failing once more to confine their mate as they'd been ordered to. As it stood, she came and went as she pleased. She was supposed to be a prisoner.

There was nothing I could do this time, Solis insisted.

"Yes, there was," Malcolm rumbled.

She kissed me, Solis said, helping him fasten the closures of his leather vest in place with nimble shadow fingers. They stood together inside the ruins of a sandstone tower, facing the courtyard and the copse of overgrown willow trees at its center. *If you think she's so easy to resist when she wants something, then I'd like to see you try.*

Malcolm could only scowl in response.

A cry came out from the gatehouse, an alert from the guard manning it. "Carriage approaches, my lord!"

Solis flew up to inspect the situation himself. *It's Elspeth.*

"Open the gate," Malcolm shouted to the guard, then he jogged to the entrance to welcome his guest as the heavy gates pulled openly slowly.

Lady Elspeth trotted in on her spotted gelding, yards ahead of a lumbering coach pulled by two heavy mounts. The lady was Dagrún's daughter—the baron from next door—and nocturnal, which made her timing there especially odd. Elspeth wore a hunting costume made of light wool. Despite her workaday outfit she still carried an air of nobility in her

willowy frame and elegantly long nose. A Lunar fae, her skin was dark gray and her hair a shiny shade of midnight blue.

“Hello, old man,” she greeted warmly.

Malcolm helped her down from her saddle, then pulled the young woman into a friendly hug. She grunted like the embrace pained her. From the satchel at her saddle, she removed a rolled kit swaddled in thin leather.

“I hope you still know how to do a decent field stitch,” she said, shoving the kit into his chest.

And only then did he notice the tears in her tunic, the cut in her riding gloves. He turned her slowly to inspect the shoulder she appeared to be favoring, revealing a nasty gash that had sliced through the wool and her skin. The wound was fresh and bleeding freely.

“An animal,” Malcolm guessed. “A large one.”

“A mad wolf. I’ve been hunting them with father and the Seelie mages he recruited to protect the villagers,” Elspeth said. Working with Seelie explained why she was awake during the day. “Good thing I was out. I happened upon this runaway carriage that was headed here, looking for you. The wolves nearly made a meal of the horses. One of the drivers was thrown. He had to be taken to hospital. Father has him.”

“Headed my way?” Malcolm turned to watch the carriage rounding the courtyard before coming to a stop. The gates pulled together slowly with a loud clatter of gears and metal on wood.

Before Elspeth could answer his question, the carriage door popped open, and a golden-haired mortal woman climbed out.

“This is the last time I make a house call,” Susan Boots said loudly, her voice carrying across the lawn. She was the madam of the finest brothel house in River Row. Malcolm enjoyed an easy friendship with her.

“Sacred stars,” Malcolm cursed quietly. “I forgot we had plans. So much has happened in the last week.”

“I advise you not to let them hear you say that,” Elspeth whispered.

“Fuck me,” Malcolm grunted, rubbing a hand across his grizzled jaw.

“Those words you can probably let them overhear. They’re used to them, I imagine.” Elspeth grinned.

The curve of her smile inspired his own. “Go have a seat in the gatehouse,” he told her, “and I’ll sew you up. Just give me a minute to set my guests to rights.”

“You can’t send them back the way they came,” Elspeth warned. “Those woods and the roads near them are teaming with oddities. We got your letter—and a frog from the fairy child who delivered it. And we heard about what happened at Reedlet. It’s just like that in the thick of the woods now: darkness and madness. We lost a few farmhands in there, we think. Men are missing from their homes. The only upside is our actions in bringing down the wolves has reminded the farmers why they have a lord. It’s brought an end to the talks of revolt.”

“I think I may have found your farmhands here. They scaled my walls full of a violent glamour. Regrettably, they won’t be coming back home. Go sit down, and try not to bleed out,” he added sarcastically. The wound wasn’t so dire as all that. “I’ll be right there.”

Field kit tucked under his arm, Malcolm took his time crossing the courtyard. He needed a moment to think up all the best words to fix what he’d bungled. He reached Susan and her business partner, who was still rummaging around in the cabin. Both women were dressed in traveling clothes, but the large trunk strapped to the hood of the vehicle was no

doubt overflowing with luxury. The lovely ladies did quite well for themselves.

Most of their success could be credited to their business savvy, but some of it was thanks in part to Malcolm. He'd been introduced to them by the Queen of Night herself. Now, Susan and her partner Margot came to parties to help add life to the revelry in exchange for being introduced to Malcolm's most affluent and lonely guests.

A regular house party he'd completely forgotten to cancel.

"You're a hard man to find these days," Susan said, chin in the air. She crossed slender arms over her chest.

"Susie," he greeted gently.

Margot cut in, leaning her dark-haired head out the carriage door. "He forgot about us." She shot a knowing look at her partner. "Told you he forgot. That's why he wasn't at Reedholm. There wasn't a venue change last minute to this old place."

Malcolm's mouth fell open. "All I've done is say a name."

Susan nodded. "It was the way you said it. Full of guilt and self-loathing."

"Self-loathing? Come on now."

"Oceans of self-loathing," Margot added. "You're always saying cruel things about yourself. I'd hate to hear what goes on inside your head. I just told Susie you'd be twice as handsome if you only had it in you to like yourself better."

Malcolm took her hand and helped her from the carriage. "Fix me later, ladies, please. For now, I need to sew up your savior. Later, I'll explain everything and beg you properly for your forgiveness. The

footman will take you inside and find you somewhere comfortable to rest.”

Margot stared him down with hazel eyes that saw too much. She had a warm complexion, generous breasts, and a rounded stomach. She was one of the most beautiful women Malcolm had ever seen, but in that moment, the dark-haired doxy did absolutely nothing for him.

Hrafn had wedged herself so far into his heart, he simply didn't have a taste for anyone else anymore.

And he was going to lose her soon.

The wave of self-loathing that notion triggered was nearly suffocating.

“Well, this isn't a very cheery place, is it,” Susan said, looking around at the towering stones.

“It doesn't say ‘get drunk and merry’ no.” Margot hugged her arms and shivered. “It makes me think of tombstones.”

Malcolm was too lost in his own head to respond to their chatter.

“We'll do as you ask, Malcolm,” Susan said, pulling him out of his gloomy thoughts, “so long as there's good food to be had in the near future. We're starving. Feed us well and all will be forgiven. We'll get out of your hair now.” She hooked her arm through Margot's as Malcolm waved a footman over.

When he entered the gatehouse, Elspeth was waiting for him, seated on a wooden box opposite the door, long legs crossed at the ankles. She'd pulled one arm out of the woolen tunic of her hunting costume, exposing the entirety of her stormy-gray shoulder.

“Hurry,” she teased, “before the limb turns black and falls off.”

“It's your skin I'm sewing up, not an old coat. I don't recommend rushing me.” He used the space beside her to roll out the kit, checking the

needles, examining the supplies.

“You do know what you’re doing, yes?” she prodded.

“I taught *you* how to do a field suture. Of course I know how. Hold still.” Malcolm uncorked a jar and sprinkled an acrid powder over the injury. He pinched the wound shut with little regard for how it stung. Her wince was gratifying. That would teach her, insolent thing.

For the pain, he removed a small jar of a strong liquor made from aged jelly plums grown up north in the Seelie Provinces. He slipped it into her hand. She broke the seal on the cap and swallowed the whole of its contents in one go.

As he sewed her up, Elspeth asked a few pointed questions about the prisoner he kept in the ‘belly of the fortress’ under lock and key. Apparently, rumors abounded already.

“She’s my mate,” he confessed.

“And you believe her innocent of all this witchcraft nonsense?” It wasn’t an accusation. She was fishing for the facts. “It makes sense. The madness continues while she’s been locked away under your guard. She couldn’t be responsible.”

He repressed the urge to scoff at the notion that he’d ever confined Hrafn successfully. Malcolm was a terrible jailer. “There’s a monster in those woods. I’ve seen its shadows at work. A phantom with a piece of god-soul—stop squirming.”

As he explained, Elspeth took him at his word, expressing no doubts. There was a natural kinship between them, a trust forged after being neighbors for so long.

Her father had offered her hand to him years ago. She’d just had her 157th birthday. She was a woman by then, he knew, but he couldn’t do it.

Not when he could still vividly remember the day she was born, could still picture the fledgling who enjoyed riding bareback and hated pinning up her hair for court.

An ambitious woman, she hadn't been against the marriage. There were worse fae than the Mad Marquess to be chained to, she'd said. It wouldn't have been a love match for either of them, just a partnership that served their families well, but Malcolm turned the offer down quietly and with affection. She'd make a wonderful Lady of Reedholm, but he thought of her too much like his own family, like a beloved little sister, to ever share a bed with her.

"Your mate is here," Elspeth said with a gleam in her eye, "and since you weren't expecting your friends to drop in, I've had a thought . . ."

"Yes?" he said, elongating the word. His eyes narrowed. "What are you fishing at now?"

"Given the circumstances, perhaps you wouldn't mind if I attempted to become better acquainted with Miss Susan and Miss Margot?"

"Ha. If I said no, Margot would never forgive me. She loves tall, beautiful women. And tall, beautiful men—anyone with long legs, really," Malcolm said, chuckling. "I'm all done here. You can have your fun with my blessing, but maybe don't attempt anything too strenuous. You don't want to pop a stitch." He patted her good shoulder and set to putting the medical tools back in their slots.

Elspeth craned her neck to inspect the wound. It looked red and irritated, but the suture had stopped the bleeding. "You butchered me."

He snorted at her. "It'll get the job done."

"I'm trying to woo a woman here," she teased.

"Women love scars."

“Sure we do, but this doesn’t look like a scar. It looks like I’ve got an angry eyebrow growing out of my shoulder.”

Malcolm shrugged. “Then maybe don’t let Margot see your shoulder.”

“Fine.” Elspeth bandaged the suture with a playful sigh. “But there go all my best seduction tactics.”

* * *

Malcolm changed his clothes into something more befitting a marquess before he joined his impromptu guests in the parlor. Margot waved off the footman and helped herself to the liquor cabinet. Susan sat in an armchair nearest the serving cart of cakes and refreshments. Elspeth, he noticed, had chosen the sofa closest to the fireplace. One that did not put her in the best vantage point for speaking with Margot, but certainly presented an excellent view of the lovely courtesan’s voluptuous profile.

Solis cast his shadow across the rug before him, defying the firelight. Malcolm filled a glass of wine and came to stand at Elspeth’s elbow. “How goes your conquest?”

“I’m playing hard to get,” Elspeth whispered. “It’s my best tactic, actually. Not the shoulder thing. I was teasing before.”

That wasn’t a game he could get behind. He preferred a straightforward woman, himself. Someone who wasn’t afraid to share their mind.

Or break his nose.

“Has playing hard to get worked on all your lovers?” Malcolm asked, watching Margot blow dust off a bottle of port from the corner of his eye.

“With men? Yes, always. Now, with women . . .” Elspeth glanced up at him, eyes as blue as her hair and deceptively innocent. She smiled toothily.

“Also yes.”

Laughter rumbled in his chest. Along the rug, Solis sidled in closer to their friend, soaking in her presence. In so many ways, Elspeth and her sisters were some of the only family he had left. He’d like it if she visited more but never had quite the right words to say so. He wasn’t any good at expressing sentiment, even if he was perfectly capable of feeling it profoundly, in spite of his best efforts to snuff out that sort of thing.

“Be serious for a moment,” he told her, lowering his voice.

Elspeth perked at that. “What’s the problem?”

“The prisoner I keep here. My mate. There’s something you ought to know so long as you’re here as my guest . . .”

“Oh, do tell us all about your mate, Malcolm,” Susan drawled. Startled, Elspeth’s head snapped up, Malcolm’s with it. The clever madam hid her smile behind a steaming cup of tea. “We’ve heard all the rumors, and we’re dying to know.”

“Funny thing about the fae,” Margot said, breaking the seal on the port and ignoring the drinking glasses, sipping it straight from the bottle. She rounded the bar, headed for the sofa. “They have such excellent hearing compared to us lowly humans, they forget we’re not completely deaf.”

“You’re not being as quiet as you think you are, love.” Susan added cream to her cup, eyes sparkling with mischief. “We can hear you. Especially when we’re right in the same room.”

Margot plopped down next to Elspeth, holding out her bottle to share. “Good news for you, sweetheart. First tumble with me is free.”

Malcolm’s brow furrowed. “I don’t recall that being a rule with any of the other friends I’ve introduced you to.”

Margot's hazel eyes dragged over Lady Elspeth. "Yes, but your other friends weren't beautiful women with long legs who killed a wolf for me."

"Saw that, did you?" Elspeth said with feigned calm, taking the offered port in hand. She stole a swallow, then gagged. "Oh gods," she groaned, swiping at her mouth with her sleeve. "I forgot how much I hate port."

Margot's head flew back. She cackled at the ceiling, sending her dark brown curls tumbling around her shoulders.

"Forget that happened, I beg you," Elspeth said, coughing. "Go back to thinking about the beast I slayed for you."

"Quiet, you two," Susan admonished. Her severe tone suffered slightly from the humor glittering in her eyes. She scooted to the edge of her seat. "I want to hear about Malcolm's witch. Is it true you keep her locked away? How very fae of you."

"Strangely romantic," Margot cooed, "and more than a little deranged. Yes, how very fae."

Feeling on the spot now, Malcolm tugged sheepishly at his cravat, loosening it around his neck. His friends were dressed in a revealing manner befitting their professions, their necklines cut low. He hoped an older Vanir like Hrafn wouldn't read into that too heavily.

"If either of you were to see my mate during your stay," Malcolm said, "I would ask that you not discuss your business openly in her presence. The blooming bond is still fresh between us. Unsettled mate instincts can cause even a mature fae to behave irrationally."

"You mean, don't tell her that we're courtesans?" Margot said, pointing between herself and Susan. "Or do you mean don't ask her if she wants a tumble?"

Malcolm flinched. “Both,” he rasped, his teeth clenching. “I don’t want her to get the wrong idea about our business arrangement.”

Margot pouted at him. “But my favorite thing about the fae is how opened-minded they always are regarding bed sport.”

“Hrafn is of an older generation descended from the Divine Night, called the Vanir. They were legendarily opened-minded about such things,” Malcolm said, “but when it came to their mates, the blooming bond could make them quite possessive and, well—”

“They were legendarily violent,” Elspeth finished. “Surely it’s safe for them here. Your mate is confined.”

“It’s probably a moot point.” Malcolm rubbed at the back of his neck, and Solis mimicked the gesture on the rug. “I’ve reinforced the door and the window in her room. I’ve added more locks. I’ve done everything shy of chaining her to the damned—”

Malcolm felt it when Hrafn entered the parlor, felt her heat and the thrum of their growing bond cozying up beside his heart. It struck him moments before all eyes shifted to a space just behind him. His pulse surged in his throat and his thighs.

He turned to her, and his heart thundered against the cage of his ribs. She was barefoot, ebony hair unbound. It fell in loose waves, cascading along her wings. She’d been in the woods again, scouting. He could smell the wilderness on her.

A dozen roly-poly, child-like shadows trailed her, herded from behind by Clapa, who poked at the stubborn ones as they tried to drift from the group. The little hunks of smog were supposed to be sleeping in the sunlight. Apparently, they’d awakened early.

“Aw!” Elspeth gasped. “Those look like shadow ba—”

“Don’t say babies, please,” Malcolm grumped.

In response to Elspeth’s cheerful greeting, the little puffs of darkness gathered at her feet, bouncing and chirping at her, begging for attention. She gave it to them, petting them one at a time, her cheeks filled with a smile.

Clapa flew in close to inspect Elspeth. She ran a claw through her blue hair, chittering as she tied it into a knot.

“Well, if it isn’t the world’s best tiny messenger,” Elspeth said. “Thank you again for the frog and Malcolm’s letter.”

“Hoppies yum yum.” Clapa rubbed her belly.

Hrafn padded to the center of the room, taking in the guests one at a time, her expression stoic.

“Hrafn, this is Lady Elspeth Dagrún, my neighbor from the estate next door,” he said, indicating the young woman with a gesture. Then he turned to Susan and hesitated. The fae did not like to tell lies, and he had no practice at it, but the truth seemed potentially hazardous.

After a moment of unbearable silence, Susan cleared her throat, set aside her tea, and stood. She made a polite curtsy. “Malcolm’s told us so much about you, Hrafn of the Vanir. I’m Susan Boots, and this is my associate, Margot. We work in entertainment.”

“That’s right,” Malcolm said with confidence because it was true enough.

“What sort of entertainment?” Hrafn asked briskly.

“Well, we’re with the . . . um . . .” Susan looked to Margot for help.

Elspeth sat a bundle of little shadows in her lap to pet them, chin down, hiding her smile.

“The opera,” Margot said hurriedly.

She'd spoken the word in the same moment that Susan stammered out, "The theater."

"Gods," Malcolm groaned.

"Er," Susan said, fidgeting with her skirts. "Well yes, the opera *and* the theater."

"That so? The two of you must be very talented," Hrafn said without feeling. Her gaze scanned the room more closely, taking in the damage on Elspeth's hunting costume, the opened bottle of port. When they finally landed on Malcolm, those velvety brown irises nearly knocked him over.

He'd put a lot of effort into avoiding direct contact with her that week, sending Solis to handle her as needed, but it hadn't dampened her effect on him one iota. It may have even made matters worse. His mouth went entirely dry, and he licked his lips.

"I'd like to hear a song," Hrafn said, with a sidelong look at her mate before turning to face Margot.

Susan's blue eyes went big and round. She engaged in a silent conversation with her partner comprised entirely of frowns and raised brows.

Margot rose from the sofa and cleared her throat loudly.

"Ancestors save us, we're both getting murdered," Susan muttered under her breath.

Margot broke into song, and Malcolm was immediately surprised that she carried a tune so elegantly. She'd sung at parties before, of course, but she was quite drunk then. Unfortunately, the tune was a bawdy number about a buxom barmaid, not one befitting the opera. Elspeth's face scrunched up, holding in the urge to laugh. During the chorus, a snort slipped out, and the lady clapped a hand over her mouth to conceal it. The

little shadows loved the music, bouncing in place to the beat. Clapa perched on Elspeth's shoulder and danced there to the beat of her own tune.

Margot reached the second verse, and the buxom barmaid who lost her ribbon gained another bed partner. The song grew in volume along with her confidence. Hrafn listened with polite disinterest, casting glances at her mate until Margot's song ended.

"Brava," Elspeth said, clapping her hands together. The little shadows bounced boisterously. Clapa continued to dance even though the song had ended.

Margot bowed to her audience.

"Interesting," Hrafn said flatly. "And you," she said to Susan. "Recite a few lines for me. It's been an age since I've seen a performance of any sort."

Susan sucked in an unsteady breath then spoke at a rapid-fire pace, "Before I recite the only lines I can remember from 'Lady Clicket played my blanket hornpipe ripe,' I feel the urge to inform the room—the whole room, no one person in particular, mind you—that Margot and I remain dear, *dear* friends of the Bloody Queen of Night herself. She would be so very disappointed if something or *someone*," she said, shooting a glare over at Malcolm, "were to cause us any harm."

Hrafn's mouth quirked, and the creases near her eyes crinkled, and Malcolm was on to her game now.

Susan sucked in a breath, readying to recite gods only knew what. Malcolm cut her short with a raised hand. "Oh, thank the blazing stars," she whimpered. "I can't remember any lines from that dratted thing."

"Is it even a play?" Margot asked.

“I read it in some scribbles I had to scrape off the wall of the toilet room once. I never pay attention when we go to the theater.”

“Hrafn isn’t going to hurt anyone,” Malcolm said, and his heart sunk unpleasantly. “She’s just toying with you.”

Hrafn’s wings arched in a shrug. “I really did enjoy your song, though,” she told Margot. “I’ll be going now.”

“You may as well lunch with us,” Malcolm said, failing to stifle the edge of hopefulness in his voice. Now that she was in his presence again, he wasn’t ready for her to leave it.

“No, thank you,” she said, face placid. “I don’t want to keep you from having your fun.” Then she turned on her heels and padded toward the parlor doors and the little shadows immediately fell in line and followed her like loyal ducklings.

Malcolm watched her go in a silence so heavy he could feel it pulling on his pointed ears. He caught Elspeth studying his warrior woman as she left with far too much interest.

“You’re staring,” he growled.

“Sorry, old man,” she said, shooting him one of her charming grins. Clapa continued to dance on her shoulder, humming a tune of her own making. “It’s impossible not to. Your mate has a presence. She’s so *intense*.”

Susan sidled in next to Malcolm, nodding her agreement. “She’s hard to miss, that’s for damn sure.”

“It’s the wings for me,” Margot cooed. “They do something to me.”

Malcolm knew immediately that his friends were needling him on purpose. He gave them exactly what they wanted anyway, growling and grouching under his breath, stirring up their giggles at his expense.

“Oh, stop looking so disappointed,” Susan soothed, locking her arm around his affectionately. She patted his shoulder.

“I’m not disappointed,” he grumped. Solis slumped on the rug beneath him.

“Oh yes, you are, and it’s unsettling,” Margot said, balling her fists up in her skirts.

Elsbeth looked him over, and her jaw dropped. “You weren’t hoping she’d go into some bond-fed rage, were you?”

“Of course not,” he said hurriedly, then he added, “It’s not like I would have let her harm any of you.”

Margot gasped. “But you wanted her to try, didn’t you? You terrible man!”

“Fae,” Susan said with an exasperated eye roll.

Clapa kept right on dancing.

Chapter 11



Malcolm

Malcolm sent his guests off to eat their midday meal, then he went in search of his mate. He let the drumbeat in his chest lead the way, dwelling on the placid look she'd sent him before quitting the room. She was so damned difficult to read with all her subtle cues, her hidden smiles. The possibility that he'd upset her, well, that ate him up inside.

He found her in the kitchen nearest the grand hall, holding a pan over the heat on a wood-burning stove. The little base shadows had followed her there. They scampered about her legs, rolling up the counters to watch her more closely, unbothered by the heat, fascinated by the fire in the stove. While the pan warmed, Hrafn cleared space on the sideboard and more nuggets of shadows climbed up the legs of furniture to study her from there. Using the heel of her hands, she flattened little balls of dough, coating her fingers in flour. The shadows bleated at her curiously.

A satchel hung at her hip from a thick leather belt beside strange wooden tools Malcolm had never seen before. Leaning against the doorway, arms crossed over his waistcoat, he watched her work. When the dough was ready, she went to the hearth, removed a bag from her satchel and added rustic spices to a simmering pot, measuring each in the palm of

her hand. The little shadows followed after her, scampering amongst the embers.

“Watch it now,” she said gently, “don’t eat up all the fire. I need the heat.”

To Malcolm’s great surprise, the puffs of darkness listened to her. She pulled a large wooden spoon with a flat edge off her belt of tools. Cornmeal was introduced to another pot. She stirred the coarse grains energetically with the flat spoon until it resembled a type of porridge.

“You’re brooding,” she said, finally addressing him. Hrafn turned over the porridge with a fast flick of her wrist. Shadows gathered around the rim of the hot pot, watching with interest.

“I’m not brooding,” he grouched. She wasn’t even looking at him. How would she know if he was—*oh, right, the bond*.

The inky masses stood one on top of each other on the rim. Hrafn placed the spoon in the top shadow’s mouth.

“Do it like I showed you and don’t stop stirring, or the pap will get clumpy,” she said, and the puffs of darkness heeded her.

Hrafn turned her head to look at Malcolm fully then, her appraisal brisk as she wiped her hands down on the sides of her trousers.

“Is he brooding?” she asked Solis, peeking over the curve of her wing to the shade he cast on the tiles below.

Solis nodded his shrouded head. Then he left Malcolm’s side to cozy in next to her own shadow stretching out from her bare feet.

“Well, that’s just not fair,” Malcolm said. “You’ve turned my own soul against me.”

Hiding a secret smile in the corner of her mouth, Hrafn returned to the stove to fry up buttery little flat breads in the dry pan until they were crisp

and golden. When they were done, she slid them one at a time onto a plate on the sideboard, chasing off the curious clumps of base shadows. Malcolm pulled a stool up beside her, sitting close enough that his tail could reach out to caress her hip or wind around her side.

She allowed the affection. If she could feel him brooding, could she feel the apology in his touches? He thought she could.

Without looking at him, Hrafn inched the plate of bread his way. Then she went back to supervising the pot on the hearth. The gift before him, so tenderly given, made his throat tighten. He pulled the plate closer and huddled over it, savoring it with his eyes, inhaling its warmth.

“Is something wrong with the food Cook makes you?” he asked, when the knot finally left his throat. “If there is, I can change that.”

“I like cooking for myself. Lunar fae boil all the fun out of their crops,” she said, “and I don’t eat flesh. Cook and I have an understanding of sorts. When I come into her kitchen, she throws her hands up in the air, lets out a yelp, then runs out that door there and stays away until I’m gone.”

“An interesting arrangement,” he said.

Hrafn smiled at him with her eyes. Removing the pan, she snuffed out the heat with a metal cover. Then she went to the hearth and hefted the heavy pot filled with colorful beans and vegetables. She placed it on the cooling burner. He couldn’t name all of the spices he smelled curling around him in the steam: ginger, garlic, onion, tomato, peppers . . . His nostrils flared trying to identify them all.

Testing the bread with his finger, he waited for it to cool. Then he pulled it apart. It was light and flaky and smelled mild. “Is this Vanir bread?” He’d never seen it before.

“Manna-heim, I call them,” she said, “from a place outside the Faelands. They taught me to cook. I wish to return to them again soon.”

His heart gave another painful lurch at the reminder that she longed to leave for a place where he couldn’t follow. “The mortals you knew are gone now,” he said, trying to mask the jealous venom in his words with a casual tone.

“I would like to go all the same. I’ve done it before. Visited when I was younger, then returned over a century later. Their descendants knew me, had heard stories about the Winged One.” Her face lit at the memory. “They called me sister. Some things had changed about them, but the important things I had come to cherish were still the same.”

“Like this bread,” he said with his mouth full. It was buttery and good. In all honesty, it could have been terrible, and he wouldn’t have minded. Mate gifts were precious, whatever they were. His heart thumped in his chest at the thought of being tended to, and the hairs on his arms stood at attention. The bread wasn’t terrible at all. It was perfect.

She’s perfect, Solis purred.

Malcolm was so hopelessly sentimental about the damn bread, he wanted to shake himself. Solis sighed contentedly.

“Roti,” she said. “That’s what they called it. It’s a recipe they learned from another people. Learning and passing on knowledge to others is a cornerstone of their faith. It’s one of the reasons I value them so highly. I want to learn new things, see new things, and they do too. Each time I visit, they have so much to show me. I can’t wait to see what they’ll teach me next.”

In a smaller bowl, Hrafn had prepared a tangy relish made of dried fruit. She removed the lid she’d used to keep it warm and showed it to

him, allowing him to fill his senses with it.

“You’ve done excellently with the pap,” she told the shadows as she gathered the porridge from the hearth. The shadows puffed proudly and followed at her heels.

She motioned for Malcolm to fetch plates, and he obeyed, adding them to the growing clutter on the sideboard. She spooned the pap out generously on each dish, then piled the rustic vegetable stew on top. She added a dollop of the relish to the side with a surprising spoonful of yogurt.

He frowned at the tart cream.

“Trust me,” Hrafn said. “It’ll cool the spices on your tongue. You’re going to need it.”

He watched her eat. She tore free a piece of the bread, then mixed the relish with the beans and vegetables and the pap, scooping up the pooling sauce with a corner of roti. She shoved the bread-borne mixture into her mouth, and the little contented sounds she made had him sitting up straighter. He followed her steps. Malcolm ate the bread, which was so mild it soaked up the flavors perfectly.

His lips and tongue burned afterward. He cooled them with the yogurt. The meal delighted his tastebuds and his heart. After he downed his first plate, he asked for seconds.

“Shouldn’t you be eating with your guests?” she asked pointedly.

“Are you bothered by them now? You didn’t seem to be earlier,” he grumped, while she reloaded his plate. “But you should know, I didn’t bring those courtesans here to warm my bed. Weeks ago, they were invited to a house party to entertain my guests. After the attack on Reedlet, I

forgot to cancel, and now their road home is barred by the monster and the animals it has poisoned with madness.”

“They entertain your guests?” She studied him over her lashes. “*Not* you?”

“That’s right. Not that you were worried. Apparently, the bond doesn’t pull at you as ruthlessly as it does me. If I found you in the company of courtesans, and I thought you’d hired them to service you, I think someone would have to knock me unconscious to keep me from acting foolishly.”

You’re brooding again, Solis warned.

“I wasn’t so unaffected,” Hrafn confessed. “My thoughts ran away from me when I overheard who they were. I’m not bothered by their profession, of course, just their proximity to and familiarity with my mate. They’re lucky I’m as old as I am. A much younger Vanir would not have behaved so well.”

“Don’t say all that just to make me feel better, now,” he said gloomily. Solis snorted at him.

“I’m *not*. I had thoughts,” she confessed with the casual air of someone reading an ad from the morning paper. “Violent notions I had to repress, and it wasn’t easy.”

He raised a brow at her archly. “Tell me more.”

“Well . . .” Hrafn dropped her fork and ran a finger mindlessly along the wooden edge of the sideboard, drawing it closer to where his hand rested. “As a start, I’d like to hurt anyone who smiles at you. But not just your friends. This is an ongoing phenomenon.”

Malcolm scooted his stool in closer to where she stood, wooden legs scraping the tile. “Do go on.”

“Anyone who touches you should be thrown into a pit of vipers then impaled on a spear. Serves them right.”

Malcolm’s brows lifted. “You flatter me.”

“And set on fire,” she cooed.

“Mm, even better.”

“How dare they touch what’s mine. And you . . .” Feeling crept into her voice. Leaning along the sideboard, she jerked on his cravat, pulling him in tight. Her breath caressed his lips. “For tolerating the smiles and touches of others, it may have occurred to me that I should rip your still beating heart out of your chest. I could hold it in the palm of my hand before your eyes, just to remind you who it actually belongs to.”

Malcolm touched his brow to hers, the base of his antlers bumping against her hair. “If that isn’t the most romantic thing a woman has ever said to me, may the stars fall from the sky right now.”

Her lips twitched. He loved the subtle sarcasm hidden under layers of intensity she wore like armor. Loved her system of honor, the way she fought, the way she cooked, the way she fucked. He related entirely to her desire to never hold still, to never stop learning. She made him want to keep moving himself, to never settle, never cease.

He loved her for making him want more instead of just accepting his lot.

Solis floated up beside him in complete agreement. They loved her. Neither cared that, compared to the vastness of their lives, the few days they’d known Hrafn were nothing. It didn’t matter because it didn’t change the truth of it. Immortality and the trajectory of where they were headed had been altered the second they spotted her in the trees. This warrior

woman had come into their life like a cannonball, and nothing had survived the wreckage. Nothing else mattered.

In his exuberance to finish off his second plate, he accidentally spilled a little onto the floor. The nearest shadow baby, a lumpy one, bleated excitedly, then dove for the beans and pap, licking it up and swallowing it down.

“Ha,” Malcolm scoffed, “that’s not an ember. Those were beans, silly thing.”

The lumpy one seemed pleased with himself at first. Then he lightened in color from black to dark gray, and he coughed so hard he broke into three smaller pieces of darkness. The clumps of smog rolled onto their backs and cried in unison. Malcolm burst out laughing.

“There, now,” Hrafn said, as inky blue tears leaked down their faces. She spooned a bit of the yogurt into each of their sobbing mouths, soothing them. They gummed the cream for a moment, then slowly cheered, returning to their darker color.

Malcolm watched her gentleness and felt a pang of remorse. She was doing a better job tending to the shadows, who were his responsibility, than he was. Perhaps that was why he disliked it when she kept calling them babies. It was one thing to be a neglectful master, another issue entirely to be a poor father.

Malcolm scooped the puffs into the crook of his arm. They snuggled together in his embrace. “That’s it, now,” he said encouragingly, hugging them gently, and the three bits of smog trembled as they reformed into the lumpy one he recognized. “There you go. Well done.”

Hrafn gave him an admiring look that pleased him to his core. The light in her eyes felt like a precious thing, a gift as important as the bread

she'd crafted. With just one simple glance, she'd made him feel like a bigger man. A better one, too.

He would be in hell when she left.

Might as well enjoy the trip there, Solis said, and Malcolm couldn't agree more. Avoiding her was a useless endeavor. He needed to soak up as much of her as possible, create memories he could treasure for an immortal lifetime.

"The woods are full of beasts," Malcolm said gruffly. "The monster has his eye on this fortress, and I can no longer waste my efforts on trying to keep you confined because I need your help. I'm not yet ready to master the monster. My powers strain my muscles, physically and mentally. I need to train, but it's hard to prepare effectively alone, and you've got Solis so abysmally distracted, he's no good to me."

I beg your pardon? Solis griped.

What did I say that isn't true?

Instead of answering, Solis curled up closer to Hrafn's shadows on the floor.

"I've seen you training," she said, "and I've wanted to join you, but you've been very stubborn about the little matter of my arrest."

"Little matter," he said, chortling. Then he sighed in resignation. "I wrote to the king several days ago, but I've received no response from him with the roads barred. I've told him what I've seen. If he wants to punish me for making better use of you after all that, then so be it. I'm not any good as a jailer, anyway. If challenged, at least I can tell him I wholeheartedly tried."

"I'll train you like the Vanir, and we'll bring down the monster together." The glint in her eyes was full of fire, a warrior ready for battle.

That fire was contagious. Malcolm felt himself sinking into the heat in her gaze and igniting. His hands balled into fighting fists. “My ability to control shadows was strongest when I was at my fittest. It’s unreasonable to expect me to get back to that peak performance in a short time, but surely we can make a few improvements if we try.”

“More than a few.” She nudged his plate closer to him. “Now finish eating. You’re going to need your strength.”

* * *

They met in the courtyard after their meal. Malcolm had changed back into his leathers and immediately regretted it. He felt confined and uncomfortable in his training gear. The shadow babies and Clapa watched from the steps that led to the keep’s entrance.

“I may need to give up meat and wine for a while,” he said, pulling on the ends of his vest. “I’ve let myself get soft. You’ve got your work cut out for you.”

“Training isn’t about changing your appearance. It’s about making you faster and stronger.” Hrafn moved in front of him and reached out, pressing a hand against his belly. There was a great deal more give there than he preferred. She looked him over, head cocked to the side. “I like that there’s more of you, and you’re not soft, even for a lordling. I’ve seen your strength.”

In the grass below Malcolm’s feet, Solis’s chest puffed out at the compliment. Malcolm did a slightly better job of hiding the pride he felt at her praise, but he curbed the feeling. He didn’t want her expectations up too high. The life of a lord didn’t lend itself to athletics unless one

considered writing absurd amounts of letters athletic in some fashion. His finger muscles were in decent shape, he supposed. “I haven’t had a proper reason to use a sword in ages. I’m practically a dandy lord—”

Hrafn punched him right in the sternum, hard enough to knock him back a pace. Clapa cackled from the steps. A smile sprung to Malcolm’s lips even as he groaned out in pain. Her violence always triggered his good humor. His father had instilled a love of rough play in him, the Vanir way.

“Ow, woman.” He rubbed at his chest, grinning ear to ear. “What the blazes was that for?”

“Stop saying unkind things about my mate,” she said flatly.

“Raven,” he said chuckling, “I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but your mate is a shit-sack. It’s a wonder you haven’t noticed yet.”

Her brow wrinkled in a scowl. “You’re lucky you’re *you*.” She hit him again, a lightning-quick strike to his shoulder. Clapa’s bell-like laughter echoed behind him.

Wincing, he rubbed where it smarted. “If it was someone else pointing out all my deficiencies, what’d you do?” he asked, indulging his curiosity and his pride. “Toss them into a pit of vipers? Head on a spike?”

“For insulting my mate?” She didn’t have to think on it long. “I’d have to crush their bones to mush,” she said definitively.

His heart ballooned in his chest. “All of them?”

“I don’t do things in half measures, Malcolm. Yes, all of them. Now, come along, and keep up. If you fall behind, I’ll have to hit you again.”

Malcolm couldn’t tell if she was teasing, but it didn’t matter. The threat had him grinning at the back of her head like a fool. She’d bound all her hair up in one thick plait. Her feet were back in boots. She wore

buckskin breeches that were cuffed at her knees under a loose linen shirt which swallowed her well-muscled frame.

Hrafn took off at a jog, circling the courtyard, her pace light and breezy, wings tight against her back to keep from catching the air. A sheen of sweat soon coated Malcolm's skin. The sun worked to bake his leathers onto his body, and the late summer humidity made him feel like he was drinking his breaths, but he kept pace with her as she'd ordered him to.

The shadow babies tried to jog after them, but they couldn't keep up long. They became easily distracted and wandered off to explore the courtyard.

The demon hawk, Ezra, joined them thereafter, swooping overhead, calling down at his mistress. Whatever it was he was saying, it encouraged her to pick up her pace. Soon they were sprinting, and an impromptu race broke out between the three of them.

Malcolm dashed ahead, rounding in front of the ruined sandstone tower, following the great walls. He felt a pull of air near the tops of his pointed ears, and he peeked over his shoulder. Hrafn flew at his side, wings propelling her in front of him.

"Cheat," he grunted.

"It's not cheating to use the gifts the divines have given you," Hrafn said, and it annoyed him that she spoke so clearly, still as fresh as she was before they started the exercise.

Malcolm, on the other hand, couldn't suck enough air into his lungs. His thighs burned.

We have gifts from the divines, Solis reminded him.

Do it, Malcolm said.

Solis joined with Malcolm, lifting off the ground like a smoky cloud and filtering into his body, and for a brief moment, Malcolm felt lighter, like he'd been filled with air and beams of sunlight. Because he didn't trust the powers he'd inherited, he often kept his shadows separated from him, an added layer of protection he insisted upon to prevent his father's fate from befalling him. He vowed never to be as reckless as the Mad Maker had been. Losing his sanity and dying would not be the end of Malcolm's story.

But duty called. Here and now, he embraced his shadows, hugging his soul tight.

Ghostly black wings erupted from his back. Thick dark tendrils flapped in one big powerful, soundless wave, and Malcolm shot into the air. Hrafn let out a gleeful cheer, and a small game of chase ensued.

Malcolm pursued her. They cut through the courtyard and circled the large granite tower until they could reach out and touch the battlements at the top. Ezra perched amongst them and squawked excitedly. Malcolm had a moment's pause to consider whether he was pushing himself too far too fast after such a long hiatus. One daring look from her, and he was after her again, the thought gone, like mist in the wind.

He caught up to her near the battlements, catching her by the ankle and yanking her down.

She chased after him next. They glided back toward the center of the courtyard. He swooped and sailed, turned loops and made a show of his skills, but his acrobatics didn't last long. His blood roared in his ears. He felt alive again, but his tiring body was catching up to him. He slowed. She cut him off at the next bend in the wall, tackling him to the lawn.

Malcolm's shadow retreated from his body when they landed. Solis lay in the grass in a pool of darkness, looking murky and spent. The use of so much glamour had been exhilarating, but it had come at a cost. Malcolm's overworked muscles felt like soup. Hrafn scooted off his back. He climbed to his feet, took two steps forward, and collapsed.

Clapa's cackles echoed in the air. The little fairy fell to her back, laughing.

"I . . . I didn't just fall," Malcolm said, disbelief muddying his words, his head full of confusing fog.

"Of course not," Hrafn said drolly. "You attacked the ground most nobly."

"It had it coming," Malcolm rumbled, a headache brewing behind his eyes.

"I saw. It got right in your way," Hrafn said, her tone flat, the sarcasm subtle. "How dare."

With some effort, he rose to his feet again and his head spun. He felt the color draining from his face. Stomach knotting up, Malcolm made it another few paces before he vomited in the grass. Hands clasped to his knees, hunched forward, he felt bile burn in his throat. When he fell next, he managed not to land in his vomit. A small blessing.

Rolling onto his back, he groaned at the sky and clouds whirled above him.

Clapa flew in, wings buzzing. "Attaway Mal Mal?"

Malcolm made a pained noise. "Not attaway."

The clumps of child-like shadows came together to check on their master. They brushed against him, warming his sides. Clapa disappeared.

Hrafn squatted next to him and crossed her legs beneath her. She ran blessedly cool fingers over his clammy brow, and a grateful grunt puffed from his lips. Solis formed a bubbling puddle in the lawn, sloshing in closer to Hrafn. She reached for him too, caressing his darkness, connecting them together like a conduit. Solis rippled in response to her touch.

“I think that went well,” she said, her hint of a smile crinkling the corners of her fawn-colored eyes.

“Easy for you to say,” Malcolm gasped, and his lungs hitched. “Your insides aren’t trying to become your outsides.”

She laid a comforting hand on his back when he vomited in the grass again. The relish and pap were not nearly as delightful in reverse. Hrafn sent a passing servant after a bowl of fresh water, and the boy responded immediately to her crisp, authoritative tone.

Clapa reappeared, holding a squirming frog between her claws. “Atta betta,” she said cheerfully, setting the frog down on his chest.

Malcolm squinted at the slimy thing. It squatted there, peering back at him. The shadow babies nuzzled against his sides.

“Well done, Clapa,” Hrafn said. “That was just the thing he needed.”

Clapa chirruped happily. Malcolm grunted at the frog and the frog made a noise back. Then it turned and leapt off his chest. The shadow babies rolled after it as it bounded through the grass. Clapa joined in the chase game.

The water arrived in a wooden bowl, along with strips of cloth. The servant lowered to a knee to help his lord, but Hrafn took the bowl and dismissed him with a wave. Wetting one of the cloths, she ran it over

Malcolm's brow, and his lashes fluttered. The coolness eased some of the churning in his belly.

She squeezed water into his mouth so that he could cleanse it of the sour taste, swirling and spitting it out. When he returned to his back, she ran the cloth over his lips, then under his chin and behind his neck, and that was heaven. With each gentle glide, he felt more grounded. The world spun less. He wanted her not to have to care for him in this way, wanted not to have ruined himself so quickly, but it eased too many of his discomforts to have her touch, her presence so close.

Solis gurgled and bubbled. Hrafn laid a hand in the darkness, taking care not to ignore his weakened and needy soul. She wet the cloth once more, wrang it out until it was damp, and laid it over the top of his face, covering his forehead, eyes, and the bridge of his nose.

"Leave it," she scolded when he squirmed.

The wet compress helped calm his nausea, so he kept his eyes closed and let his limbs fall lax, trusting his mate. A breeze blew, and shifting grass tickled his neck. The breeze was cold, with hints of the coming fall carried within it. He flinched when he felt her plucking at his boot laces. His feet were filthy, the stockings damp . . . but his mate was tending to him, a bonding ritual older than time, and so he didn't dare stop her, no matter the worries rising up in him like the sick he'd spewed in the grass.

She shucked his boots and peeled off his stockings without comment. He sensed no judgement in her. Hrafn rinsed his feet, and when they were dry, she dug her thumbs into his arches one at a time, and his body shivered. The sudden pressure deep in his tissue eased an ache that he felt shooting up into his ankles and calves. Hrafn pulled on his toes, cracking them, letting the air out of his joints.

She cared for him: his heels, his calves, his knees, his hands. Her thumbs ran gently over the pulse at his wrist and the creases in his palms until he had the strength to sit up on his own. The bond pumped in his chest, greedy and eager for more contact, more tenderness.

He let the cloth fall from his face, onto his lap with a splat. Solis had reassembled into a muddy version of his usual self. Malcolm blinked until his vision fully cleared and his mate came crisply into view.

Hrafn gifted him with one of her rare smiles. “I’ll get you there, shadow god,” she told him. “I promise I’ll get you there, as strong as before. Just don’t give up on me.”

“Give up on you?” he said, and his voice was coarse as gravel. “Never.”

Giving up on himself was another matter entirely.

Chapter 12



Hrafn

Hrafn spent the next week training her mate. They took to the courtyard in the mornings and then again just before dark. They cooked meals together—because the bond liked it. They gave other reasons, claimed it was easier that way, hedged that Malcolm just wanted to avoid eating flesh for a while, but she knew the truth of it.

She was doing a terrible job of avoiding the things that the bond wanted her to do. It simply felt too good to give in, to draw closer, to give gifts, and to learn each other the way the mate instincts craved.

Their bond wasn't the only thing growing.

Hrafn stood staring out the balcony in a sitting room on the second floor of the keep. Dusk was nearing. The wide doors were made of plated glass that soaked the room in sunlight. Equipped with a large fireplace, it was the best spot to keep the shadow babies content. The little nuggets of dark mist hadn't grown much in that first week at Skugborg. During their second, they'd come together, doubling in size and halving in number, a promising sign of Malcolm's growing strength.

She looked to the horizon through the plate glass. Beyond the line of trees was nothing but darkness, a deep black that the sun did not pierce.

She hadn't been able to see the monster from the window the day before. Now there it was, moving like smoke between the trunks.

"It's growing," she said, worrying her lip.

Malcolm sat in an armchair near the bookcase, covered in cloudy puffs of the needy shadows. They clung to his legs and arms, eager for his attention. The remains of the babies' most recent meal cooled on the marble just outside the fireplace grate.

"Just an illusion," he soothed. "A phantom is a finite being. It can make it look as though it's spreading, but the only dangerous part of that darkness is at its heart where the monster hides its glamour, waiting to whisper madness into your ears. Don't let it alarm you. We've received no more reports of missing people. Phantoms like to nest. It'll stay put unless something comes to threaten it."

Malcolm shifted in his seat, bumping the clumpy ball of fog on his lap. It opened its mouth and squawked in irritation, and the other little shadows joined in, drowning him in a chorus of irritated bleats.

"Hush now," he soothed the shadows. Solis joined him, rising off the floor to pat the little nuggets on their ghostly heads until their cries died down again. The ball in his lap nuzzled against his leg, settling in to go back to sleep.

Hrafn fought to repress a laugh and Malcolm caught her.

"They're not actual babies," he insisted. "They just—"

"Look, act, and sound like babies. That's all."

"That's all," he said.

Margot and Susan entered the sitting room, and Hrafn fought against the urge to frown. She wanted to like the women because they clearly mattered to her mate, and they were very amusing. Ezra found them

fascinating. He'd follow them about, enjoying the interesting things he learned about people from their conversations. He swooped into the room behind them and came to perch on Hrafn's shoulder.

But the courtesans had this habit of always smiling at Malcolm . . . Their smiles were friendly, but her instincts made her irritable about it, and the blooming bond had stolen strength from her more rational thoughts. She trod carefully in their presence, making her face placid, her tone neutral, not wanting to intimidate them. It was easiest just to avoid them.

Clapa rode in on Susan's shoulder. The three of them together had a talent with the little shadows and took immediately to caring for them as needed. They took turns feeding them, entertaining them, and giving into their need for touch and affection.

Margot stopped short near the bookcase. Using her finger, she began to count the clumps of smog on Malcolm. "We leave you alone for a few blasted minutes, and you've already lost one, damn you." She threw her hands up, exasperated.

"What are you going on about?" Panic pitched Malcolm's voice up. "Aren't there six of them now?"

"There's seven," Margot stressed. "Where's Lumpy?"

"Lumpy? Gods, I told you not to name them . . ." Malcolm stood up, knocking the sleepy balls of shadow onto the floor. They bleated at his boots angrily.

"It's all right," Susan said. "I think Clapa knows where Lumpy is." She and the chattering fairy retreated into the hall, appearing moments later with a clumpy bit of shadow between her hands. "He was licking the lamp again. He likes that lamp. How he climbs the wall, I'll never guess,

though. I never see him do it. I just turn about and there he is, crafty little thing.”

Tension melted out of Malcolm’s shoulders. “Well, good. You found him.” He rubbed at the back of his neck, and his tail flickered uncertainly.

Ezra squawked, drawing attention to himself.

Susan shared a meaningful glance with her partner before turning to Hrafn. “We’ve been wondering about you and your familiar,” she confessed. “How did the two of you become, well, the *two* of you?”

“We love a good war story, and Malcolm says you were in the war,” Margot added eagerly.

Hrafn felt the corner of her mouth twitch. “Are you hoping I’ll embellish the tale like a mortal would?”

Margot nodded. “Well, of course. Stories are always better with the right kind of trussing up.”

Malcolm guffawed at that.

Why not tell them? Ezra said. *What could it hurt?*

You must really be fond of these humans, she said, surprised. Ezra didn’t usually like talking about himself. “Hm.” Hrafn ran her fingers thoughtfully over Ezra’s chest feathers, debating where to begin. “My clan fought with the Seelie near Mount Rasika during the war. The Unseelie met us with a force of dragons from the mountains and phantoms from Hell, the lake of fire south of there. Demons were there too, but they’re neutral creatures.”

“Just in it for the blood,” Susan guessed.

“They would consume the dying from both sides of the battlefield, yes,” Hrafn said. “Ezra watched me take down a dragon. I broke my spear against its heavy scales in the fight, and another was coming to avenge its

kin. So I fashioned a weapon out of the dead beast's claws. I used it to fell the next, but that second fight had consequences. Dire ones."

"Amazing," Margot said, hazel eyes wide.

"This is why we love war stories," Susan said eagerly. "How big were they, the dragons?"

Hrafn peered out the glass doors of the balcony, reexamining the courtyard. "The second was nearly the size of this keep, so not too large for a dragon. The first was smaller, a younger beast."

"Sacred stars," Susan gasped, and Malcolm chuckled.

"The second lay dead at my feet, but I was bleeding out and not long for the world. Ezra was impressed. He thought I deserved not to die just yet, and he made a deal with me. My life for a small piece of my soul." Hrafn watched the old memories play out in her mind's eye, removing a tiny piece of her soul using a drop of her own blood, transforming herself into a witch. The drop had hardened into a ruby-like tear that she gifted to him. She remembered the stink of sulfur burning her nose as the demon neared her—to finish her off, she'd thought, but she'd been wrong.

Demons aren't mindless like phantoms. Ezra had wanted to bargain, and bargain they did.

"A piece of your soul and eternal companionship," Margot said on a sigh. "What a tale."

"Companionship wasn't really part of the bargain," Hrafn explained, "but it turns out when you share such an intimate bit of yourself with another, it's difficult to be apart after that. We want to be together."

Hrafn had fallen contemplative then and had let the room grow quiet.

"How much of that was embellished?" Malcolm asked.

“Oh, I forgot to embellish any of it, actually,” she said honestly, and he laughed at her. Mirth came easily to him. She loved that he was such a joyful person.

“Come along, you,” Margot called to the little shadows. “Let’s turn on all the lanterns in my room and put you to bed before the lot of you get cranky and mischievous. You too, Ember,” she said to the puffy knot that lingered near Malcolm’s feet.

Margot led them out. Susan and Clapa came up the rear, encouraging the slower shadows to keep pace.

Ezra left her shoulder, taking flight.

“Where are you going now?” she asked.

He circled the room overhead. *The ladies were telling a story about the time their business was robbed and the Queen of Night went in search of the robber. I’d like to hear how the story ends.*

“See you later, then,” she said.

Ezra made another lap around the room. *I mean, they are humans, so they’ll probably try to kill me if I’m not too careful.*

“Oh, Ezra, no. I don’t think—”

But they tell great stories, he said, and then with that, he took to the hall in the direction the parade of shadows had left in.

Hrafn always felt it when she was alone with her mate. There was a change in the air, a weight added to his stares, a shared awareness of each other. He wasn’t keeping himself from her anymore, but he hadn’t tried to bed her again either.

She didn’t want to push that issue. It seemed unfair to seduce him knowing that she was leaving, and he was staying. But just the memory of him: his touch, his weight, the intimate caress of his soul over her body . .

. She wanted all of it, all of him. She wanted to be filled again, to rut like the old gods used to, without a care for anyone else except their partner.

Her stomach swooped.

But, like she had all week, she stuffed those feelings aside, wanting to do what was best for him, and best for her heart. *Sidhek*, what was best did nothing to cool the growing ache between her thighs or the loneliness that pinched her heart when she turned in at night to sleep by herself.

“How are your hands?” she asked, lips pursed. They’d practiced with the sword today. Ezra had supplied her weapon, turning into a blade that looked like volcanic glass. Even rusty Malcolm was a talented swordsman, but his palms lacked the calluses he’d once earned.

He reclaimed his seat and opened and closed his right hand, examining it. “It’s not unbearable.”

Hrafn knelt before him. He let her turn his hand over, a small smile on his face. The skin between his thumb and forefinger was red and irritated. She pressed her touch into the worn flesh in the heels of his hands and pads of his palms, where the calluses had yet to form.

He winced, but he let her continue. Massaging his hand encouraged the skin to callus faster.

“You’re brooding,” he said.

She felt the corner of her mouth tug up. “I don’t brood.”

“Solis,” Malcolm said to his soul, and the shadowy form stood at attention, “is our mate brooding?”

Solis made a show of examining her more closely, leaning in. His tail swished at the air thoughtfully. Then he nodded his head.

Malcolm laid a hand in her hair, and her chin dropped. She wasn’t trying to brood, but . . . His light touch teased her scalp, and her eyes slid

closed. She leaned into it, laying her cheek on his lap.

More touches, gentle down her cheek. He was so, so good at the careful touches. Just as good at the rough ones. She shivered, a full body tremor.

“Raven?”

The concern in his voice had her raising her head, her cheek rubbing against the wool of his trousers.

He exhaled soft and slow. “You seemed overwhelmed. I was worried you might—”

“I wasn’t going to swoon,” she huffed, her brows pinching together. “That piece of my soul I gave to Ezra—the bond tugged on that old wound when I met you. It was too much for me then, but it hasn’t been an issue since.”

He skated his knuckles along the top of her cheek. “Why is that, I wonder?”

She knew why, but she shouldn’t answer such a dangerous question. The words were there, hanging on her tongue, wanting to be spilled.

“Why?” he asked again, his voice low and coaxing.

“I threw a spear at you that day, and you didn’t move. Weren’t frightened at all.” She licked her lips and worked her throat. “I felt the pull of the bond stronger than anything I’ve ever felt before. Then I put a knife to your throat, and you didn’t flinch. I cut you and you didn’t even put me down, like . . . like you’d rather bleed out then let me go.”

He hummed fondly in his throat. “I remember.”

“That was it for me. That was all I needed to know about my mate. I won’t be overwhelmed again,” she confessed, sitting back on her heels. Her knees grew tired pressed to the floor. When she met his eyes, she could see the gears turning in his mind.

I won't be overwhelmed because I love you. She wanted to tell him that, but such words were not only dangerous, they were unfair. Those were the words of a woman who was staying. Not the words of a mate who was leaving. She hadn't earned the right to speak them.

"I don't entirely understand. When you bloodied my nose," he said, voice husky, "was it because I'd stolen you, or—"

"I invited you to play. I spread my wings for you . . . but then you put me back."

At her words, Solis thickened and darkened into his wraith-like form that matched Malcolm's completely. Malcolm glared at his soul.

"What's he saying?" she asked and her mouth quirked. Seeing her mate argue with himself was a common occurrence and always amusing.

Malcolm rolled his eyes. "He's saying 'I told you so,' loudly and repeatedly."

Words ceased between them, but the quiet was comfortable.

Hrafn spotted a wrinkle in the crease of his pants. She busied herself with rubbing it out. He straightened under her touch. "I take it he didn't want to put me back even though I'd fainted like a green fledgling?"

"*No one* wanted to put you back," Malcolm said. His hands went to the arms of his chair, and his fingers dug into the fabric.

Flattening her hand over his thigh, she blinked at him. His heat warmed her palm and Solis shifted his weight. Tail flicking side to side, he paced like an agitated lion.

"Then why did you put me back?" she whispered.

He didn't answer her immediately. His head was tipped toward his soul like he was listening.

“You wouldn’t know,” he explained, “you’d been guarding that cage all that time, but the mating game you started, it was outlawed just over a century ago.”

Hrafn’s shoulders slumped. “Outlawed?” The reminder that the world had changed and left her behind made her feel hollow inside. She truly didn’t belong in such a place. Not anymore. Perhaps she didn’t belong anywhere at all, but she wanted a chance to try and find somewhere. Some sliver of space that she could call home for just a while. Some place that didn’t feel like such a prison.

Malcolm’s hand went to her neck. Gripping it lightly with his fingers, he pulled her back to him until her chest pressed to his knees and his eyes captured hers. “That wasn’t an admonishment. I wanted to play too,” he stressed. “But I want to be chosen first, and I missed your signal.”

How had he missed it? She’d spread her wings so wide for him.

The pad of his thumb trailed down the column of her throat, and his gaze followed the path. “The subtleties, the gestures, the hints the Vanir would use to invite their mate to play,” he said, “they were lost to time like they were lost on me. Fae lords abused the tradition as an excuse to take whomever they pleased.”

She squinted at him. “Even if they didn’t want to mate?”

“Even if they were human,” Malcolm said.

“Groselings?” She shook her head, disgusted. “That’s not the game. A groseling couldn’t fight a fae or even break free of one. Where’s the fun in that?”

“I don’t understand the appeal in taking someone so young or so helpless.” Malcolm seemed genuinely baffled. “I’d much rather steal a

woman capable of breaking my nose.” His gaze flickered over to Solis again.

“What’s he saying now?”

Malcolm took a steady inhale through his nose. “He believes he knows why you’re brooding, what it is you need,” he said, voice husky. “And he’s describing it in vivid detail.”

“Oh?” Hrafn’s wings flittered on impulse, another invitation, an instinctive one. Her pulse throbbed in her neck and between her thighs. She didn’t know what Solis was saying, but if she strained her ears, she thought she could hear *something*, a murmur of a voice, incoherent and far away.

“This has to be the last time between us,” Malcolm said gently, his eyes glassy and full of a feeling she couldn’t name because there were too many of them. A storm of emotions swam there in his deep blue depths.

“The last time.” She licked her lips. “Because I won’t stay?”

“And because I can’t go with you,” he said so softly she barely heard him.

His gaze burned into hers. She understood fully the boundary he was setting. It was a practical choice, a necessary one. One last time together intimately.

She hated it.

Hated it so much it was like acid in her belly. It seemed so unfair. First, to be stuck guarding a prison so long, and then to find the man she loved, but in order to keep him, she had to remain in that damnable cage.

A trapped bird for all her eternity.

She put a hand over her stomach to stifle the unpleasant sensation. It was a choice so wicked she didn’t want to accept it. She wanted to push it

all off into the distance for some fuzzy future version of herself to tackle.

But this was a gift he was giving her, too. A piece of her culture, a treasured mating ritual. Acceptance in a world that wanted to forget her. This last time with him was sacred, because no matter what happened, when the monster was dealt with, she was leaving her cage and taking these precious moments with her.

Forever.

Slowly she nodded her agreement, and her throat went tight. She opened her mouth to speak, but his thumb came up and stroked her lower lip. She listened.

“I do want to play. When you fight me, I’ll fight you back. When you tell me to stop, I won’t listen. I’ll make you break free on your own if you can.”

Need pooled hot and demanding between her legs. She pressed her thighs together, stopping the whimper in her throat before it could slip out and interrupt him.

“But I don’t want to miss your subtle signals ever again,” he said, and his voice had dropped to a tempting whisper. “Don’t say ‘no.’ Don’t say ‘stop.’ I’ll ignore those and assume they’re spoken in good fun. When you need the game to end, say ‘horse.’ Say that word, and Solis and I will let you go, no matter what. Say it now. I need to know you understand.”

“Horse,” she whispered, her lips curling at the humorous reminder of their first meeting.

“Don’t forget that word, little bird.” His breath blew ragged and hot across her brow. Beneath the fall front of his trousers, his cock twitched. “When I let you go, you’d better run. Run quick and fly fast, because when Solis catches you, he’s going to hold you down for me.”

An excited hum slipped past her lips, anticipating his next move, but his fingers were still there, a feathering touch warming the side of her throat.

Then his hand dropped.

Hrafn shot to her feet and sprinted for the balcony. She shouldered open the glass doors, rattling them against the paned frame. Wings spreading with an audible whoosh, she dove from the stone rim, falling fast, her heart thundering in her chest.

She didn't look back, didn't let herself despite the temptation. His wing-beats were always soundless, and she didn't need to see. She knew he was close, felt her mate's nearness thrumming through the bond, sensed him reaching out his wraith-like hand to catch her ankle.

So close, *so close*. She bit back a delighted shriek, instincts flooding her body so intensely her belly tremored.

Hrafn let herself plummet, gaining speed. Wind whipped by her ears, cooling her nose and cheeks. With one powerful beat of her wings, she lifted out of the nosedive, jetting through the courtyard, the gust of her approach ghosting over the lawn, bowing the stalks of tall grass.

She rounded the ruined tower, and then she kicked up her speed, pumping her wings with everything she had to give. She dove behind an outbuilding to hide. Solis zoomed by, not seeing her. She waited until he rounded the granite tower in the distance, looking for her, before she made a mad dash for the keep doors.

She wrenched them open, startling the domestic who hovered inside. Hrafn didn't stop even to apologize. She pressed on, through the entryway, up those treacherously steep stairs.

"My lord," she heard the servant mumble.

The sound of landing footsteps behind her fed her surging pulse. Her heart was a wild drumbeat against the cage of her ribs. She reached the landing and raced forward.

Solis ghosted through the walls at the end of the hall. He stood there before her: all broad shadows, crown of antlers, shrouded in midnight illusion, his dark tail whipping behind him.

“You cheat,” she gasped. She spun on her heels, rushing back.

The steady thump of Malcolm’s footsteps on the steep stairs headed her off.

Giddy laughter bubbled in her throat, but she wasn’t ready to give up yet. She stifled it, spinning back around until she was dizzy. She shoved into the nearest door. It didn’t open. She grabbed at the next one and the knob turned. The room was modest in size and full of an excess of mismatched furniture, some of which appeared damaged. Storage of odds and ends collected over the years.

She slammed the door shut behind her and twisted the lock home. That would slow Malcolm but not his soul. The room had a cold fireplace and a small diamond-paned window. The four-poster bed was covered in a loose quilt with draperies hanging from its sides and stacked with pillows, unused, untouched.

If she was quick, she could use her Vanir god blood to escape like she always had when he’d tried to keep her. Hrafn’s wings came around her, the familiar caress of her satiny feathers as familiar to her as the backs of her hands. In the blink of an eye, she shrank down into the form of a nighthawk, a trickster in her own right, but she didn’t need the blood of others to fuel her magic as her familiar did.

She flew toward the fireplace, pushing up into the darkness. *Sidhek!* The flue was closed.

She muttered a litany of Olden curses. She didn't have time to change back and open it. Dropping into the grate, she lay over the old coals there, her marbled feathers blending in perfectly.

Solis ghosted into the room, his shadowy head snapping side to side, searching for her. Hand darkening, he unlatched the door, and Malcolm appeared in the threshold, passing straight through his soul.

"Where'd she go?" he asked.

Solis slid to the floor and zoomed under the bed. Hrafn kept very still and held her breath. His shadows attacked the pillows next, tossing them out of the way. She kept her beak down, blending in. Malcolm stepped to the center of the room and paused. His hand went to his heart, like he could feel the tiny organ that fluttered in her chest right beside his own.

He turned toward the fireplace, and breath froze in Hrafn's small lungs. The room was growing dark, the sun fading through the diamond-paned window.

But the bond led him right to her. She tried to fly free, but he caught her around her middle, her wings flapping madly.

"You're a trickster," he purred. "I had no idea. I've never sensed any magic on you."

Transforming from beast to Vanir was as natural to her as changing her clothing, and twice as fast. She appeared in his arms, staring up at him just as she had the day they met. Soot from the fireplace coated her hair.

"I'm not a mage," she said. "I'm Vanir." She didn't have to cast spells or call on a connection to the Divine Night like the Lunar Fae did. Her connection flowed through her veins.

“Can all the Vanir turn into beasts?”

“Just the best ones,” she teased. As a distraction, she ran a hand down the buttons of his shirt and his hold on her loosened.

Hrafn threw her weight backward, flipping out of his arms, landing on her feet. She lunged for the doors, but Solis was faster. He scooped her up in solid arms and pressed her to the velvety expanse of his shadowy chest. She let out a surprised yelp, and then a husky laugh escaped her.

There was no leaving this embrace. She felt his touches everywhere, sinking around her wrists and ankles, cinching her waist. Her attempts to wriggle free accomplished nothing.

She’d had her fun either way. She’d proven that she was strong enough to play without swooning like some green fledgling. When Solis tossed her onto the bed, she attempted one last kick at his head for propriety’s sake, and her boot went straight through him.

“That is completely unfair,” she groaned.

“It’s not cheating to use the gifts the divines have given you,” Malcolm quoted.

He came up behind her, catching her around her hips and pulling her legs off the bed. She attempted to twist free, to surprise him one last time, but training together had been effective. He’d grown accustomed to all her surprises. Dropping against her, he bent her over the bed, pinning her there with his weight. The proof of his excitement nudged the heat between her legs. His chin pressed into her back. Her wings unfurled. His hands knotted in her hair, holding her cheek against the mattress.

“Am I a horse?” he asked gently.

“No,” she told him quickly, shaking her head against his hold. Saying that word would stop the game, and she wanted to be pinned down. Wanted

him to use her in this way to find his pleasure and bring them both to bliss. The bond warmed in her chest, and heat built in her core.

Solis grabbed her wrists and pulled her tight across the bed so there was no retreat left. Malcolm made quick work of her trousers, shoving them down past her knees, and the clasps of her shirt around her wings went next. When she was bare before him, he cupped her ass and ran his touch up her back, then down again to circle her waist.

She heard the clasps of his trousers loosen, felt the wool slide away until there was nothing but the hot lick of heat, of skin on skin. He didn't spread her wide this time. Malcolm encouraged her feet closer together. One palm planted low on her back, holding her belly to the bed, he worked his fingers up and down her sensitive flesh until her cunt felt full and wet.

When she moaned, Solis captured her mouth in a deep kiss, swallowing up the longing little mewls that snuck out of her.

She felt at home as Malcolm eased inside her, trousers trapped around her ankles. Solis's tail wound down between her breasts. He lifted her chin, then ran his shadowy lips across hers as Malcolm filled her pussy, pumping into her fast and hard at a climbing pace. Warm velvety pressure teased the shell of her ears, trailed down her neck. Her breasts pillowed on the mattress, and Solis circled the small mounds with tendrils of darkness, still pinning her arms to the bed with weight that was like a waking dream—real but not real.

Malcolm's pace slowed, and Hrafn whimpered, a wordless plea to finish what he'd started.

"She likes to watch," he told Solis.

Malcolm's soul blanketed her in darkness, then scooped her up off the bed with arms she couldn't see in all the inky black. He turned her with

ease and sat her before him on the bed so that her wings and back fitted against the satin expanse that made up his chest, holding her partially upright. When the darkness retreated, her head lolled against his shadowy shoulder. Solis's hands encircled her body to palm both breasts, kneading each, teasing her nipples to hard points, and a breathy moan parted her lips.

Malcolm removed her boots, then her trousers completely, pulling them down over her ankles and tossing them carelessly. He shucked his shoes and his trousers next. Opening his shirt, he shouldered out of it. His cock was a hard rod of flesh, jutting toward his belly, still glossy with her pleasure.

He looked like one of the old gods.

On his knees, he joined her on the bed. Spreading her wide, he shifted into the cradle of her thighs, wrapping her legs around his waist.

"Am I a horse, little bird?"

"You're not," she gasped. Solis gently tweaked her nipples, and her back arched.

Malcolm pulled her onto his cock. His hips moved slowly at first, gentle rotations that made her feel full and desperate. He grasped her thighs, securing her to him. She dug her heels into his ass to pull him closer, deeper. He came willingly, sinking into her greedy heat. Her body responded, gripping him like he belonged there. Solis's tail slid around her stomach, brushing down her navel and over the dark curls that crowned her sex.

As Malcolm pumped into her, Hrafn watched him disappearing inside her body, hypnotized by the slick sound of their hips meeting. Solis teased her tenderly with tendrils of midnight. His velvety touch worked the

sensitive crest of her sex until she saw stars, while warm pressure tantalized the entrance to her ass. She moaned and gasped for breath. Made wet by her pleasure, Solis pressed inside her slowly and shallowly, and her orgasm shook through her.

But that was only the first climax. They took turns working her to release; Malcolm emptied into her, then Solis would take over. When Malcolm was ready he'd take the lead again. He'd hold her and tease her or pin her to the bed. She wouldn't dare say she was tired or call him a horse and bring it all to an end. This was the last time with her mate.

She didn't want it ever to end. She wanted the inevitable goodbye to go far away and never return.

* * *

Eventually it did end. Spent and exhausted, they dozed in a heap on the bed. Hrafn warned him again about her restless habits when she slumbered.

"Is it the war?" Malcolm guessed. He was on his back, hand propped behind his head. She used him as a pillow, wings tucked beneath her. Solis curled up behind her, his tail wrapped possessively around her waist.

"No," she said, "I'm not haunted. The war was long ago, and I rarely remember my dreams anyway. It's the centuries of training."

"Ah," he said.

"Over and over again, I've coached my body to make certain movements. It remembers in my sleep. I kick and hit things. If we stay here, I'm bound to slip into slumber." She yawned.

"Are you comfortable?" He raised a brow at her.

“Very,” she cooed.

“Then I’ll be just fine.”

Chapter 13



Malcolm

Malcolm was not fine. Hrafn flopped about. Twice she stole his pillows. Her wing struck him in the face, jerking him awake from a deep slumber. She was an absolutely terrible bed companion when rest was the goal, but Malcolm was determined. He sensed she wanted his presence beside her, and he craved the intimacy of sleeping with her, so he would gift her with just that.

She stole all the covers, exposing him to the night air.

Malcolm managed to reclaim one of his pillows from the small nest she'd built for herself in her sleep in the center of the bed, forcing him to the very edge. He put the cushion between his legs, protecting his tender bits.

She punched him in the gut, mumbling in her sleep, and Malcolm almost gave up. He could make a bed on the floor instead. It was safer down there.

Solis had the bright idea to wrap her up snug, blanketing her in thick shadows. When she kicked and when she thrashed, his soft expanse absorbed the blow.

Malcolm finally got some sleep.

* * *

When Malcolm awoke it was morning, and he was alone—but not for long. The hall echoed with familiar laughter. The door to the guest chamber sprung open. Without knocking, Margot and Susan entered. Seven little clumps of shadows trailed them into the room. The little ones made a mess of the old coals in the cold fireplace.

Malcolm sat up, bleary-eyed. Margot and Susan made themselves comfortable, squatting on the end of his bed. He opened his mouth to warn them off.

“Don’t fret. Your mate is out hunting with her familiar,” Susan said comfortingly. “She’s not about to charge in here and murder us.”

“Elsbeth went home this morning.” Margot pouted at him. “You’ll have to entertain us now.”

The shadows knocked over the fire poker and sent a cloud of soot into the air. Malcolm climbed to his feet, pulled on his trousers, and chased them out of the mess before they rolled it all over the room.

“Your babies are just as restless and in need of distraction as we are,” Susan noted.

Righting the fire poker, Malcolm sighed but didn’t bother correcting her about the base shadows. The little puffs of darkness did seem restless. They gathered around his feet and bleated at him for attention, and when he bent to inspect them, they latched onto his arms, demanding snuggles. Chuckling, he sat on the floor cross-legged and allowed them to pile in his lap. They trembled there, mewling softly, heat growing between them.

“It’s all right,” he soothed them. “Solis, I have an idea,” he said to his soul, who parted from him to shade the floor.

But we don’t do that anymore, I thought, Solis reminded him. *Using those abilities worried you after what happened to Father.*

“We’ll need to make another exception, given the circumstances,” Malcolm said. Thinking of his father put a pit in his stomach.

“What’s he going on about?” Margot whispered.

“Shh, he’s talking to himself again, I think,” Susie said, waving her words away.

Vibrating with excitement, Solis floated onto the ceiling, darkening the tin tiles there. His shadowy form stretched, growing into the image of a great dragon surrounded by powerful living trees. The immortal trees had been weaponized by the Seelie to bring the Unseelie creatures down. The little balls of darkness fell silent and still, enraptured by the story Solis told with shades cast across the ceiling.

Solis had chosen the battle of Blood Mire—a favorite tale Malcolm’s father had told him again and again when he was a boy. The vicious legendary battle between the Seelie and the Unseelie continued above them.

Although the little nuggets of night were greatly entertained by the shadow show, Margot and Susan eventually grew bored of the events they likely already knew well. They meandered from the room. Malcolm dressed and slipped on his boots—pausing to remove the frog Clappa must have placed in one of them overnight. Combing his fingers through his hair, he found a knot tied in the strands above his pointed ear—further confirmation of the fairy child’s presence.

The frog hopped away across the floor, and a few of the little inky puffs broke from the group to chase it for sport.

Minutes later, a shout rang down the corridor. Malcolm leapt to his feet and ran into the hall. He found Hrafn standing there at the top of the stairs.

“Sacred stars,” Margot shouted from somewhere out of sight, “are you all right, Susie? Speak to me!”

Malcolm jogged to the landing to peer down it. He found Susan sprawled in the middle of the steep steps, Ezra circling overhead looking twice as large as usual. The air stank of sulfur—demon blood magic. Malcolm’s eyes snapped to his mate.

Hrafn lifted her hands in surrender. “I didn’t push her. She tripped.”

“I didn’t say you pushed her.” Malcolm had been thinking it, though.

“I tried to catch her, but I just missed her,” Hrafn said, tone crisp. “There’s no honor in hurting unarmed groselings, and I know these two are important to you. Naturally, I wouldn’t hurt either of them even if they do smile at you a whole lot more than what’s in their best interest.”

Now Malcolm felt guilty for thinking her capable of pushing Susan. That feeling was followed by a flare of disappointment that she wasn’t bond-jealous enough to be so wicked. Both feelings were fleeting.

Ezra flew up the stairs and alighted onto her shoulder. She ran her fingers affectionately through the feathers on his breast.

“That was very heroic, Ezra. I’m proud of you,” she told her familiar. To Malcolm, she added, “Ezra doesn’t usually think he can trust humans, but he just saved that one. They’ve had a positive impact on him, I think.”

The hawk’s black chest puffed out proudly.

Margot pulled her friend to her feet and tucked her arm around her shoulder, bracing her weight. Malcolm joined them, helping Susan back up the stairs and into the guest chamber. They sat her on the foot of the bed so she could rest. The shadow show continued above them: a great dragon breathed fire that looked like inky smog. Occasionally the little puffs of darkness yelped excitedly as shadowy trees shook and grew, stretching their limbs to battle the dragon.

“Nothing badly hurt but my pride.” Susan smiled at the doorway where Hrafn and Ezra stood watching. “Thank goodness Ezra was there. He stopped my descent and cushioned my landing, bless him.”

“Falling down the stairs is not how we’re supposed to die,” Margot grumped. “And you weren’t even in your cups.”

“I know, I know. I feel silly enough as is,” Susan said, fixing her hair. Golden strands had come out of their pins. “When we go, I promise we’ll be as old and wrinkled as aged fruit and at least as grizzled as Malcolm is, if not more so.”

Malcolm snorted.

“That’s right,” Margot said. “We go until our hearts give out at a real party.”

“A proper orgy.” Susan nodded her agreement. She tested her ankle, rolling her foot in the short boot. “None of those silly pleasure parties put on by young human lords, where the attendees separate into nervous pairs and hide in corners like green boys and girls.”

“Nothing less than true drunken debauchery,” Margot agreed. “So, no more tripping down the stairs, you,” she scolded.

Malcolm guffawed. Hrafn smiled with her eyes. Before long, they were watching the shadow show together, shadow babies gathered at their feet

until the sun brightened the room and they all fell asleep, lulled by the warm light streaming in through the glass.

Another shout in the corridor disturbed them from their slumber. Malcolm jogged out of the guest room as Hrafn and Margot contained the startled shadow babies. A footman called for him on the landing.

“A rider at the gate, my lord,” he said, eyes downcast when he saw Malcolm’s disgruntled demeanor. “Mr. Harrow is asking for you. Says it’s urgent.”

Malcolm hurried down the corridor and the steep stairs. It had to be urgent if Harrow would risk traveling around monster-infested woods to speak with him. He knew the land well, but taking risks wasn’t the sort of thing Harrow did often.

“Let him in,” Malcolm called as he reached the courtyard, and the heavy gates parted with a clamor.

Harrow walked his gelding inside and waved off the groom that offered to take his mount. “I won’t be here long,” he shouted over the clatter of the gates as they shut at his back.

“More animal attacks?” Malcolm asked, stating aloud what worried his mind most.

“Nothing like that, my lord,” Harrow said. “It’s Miss Lindiwe Zuma.”

“Is she hurt?” Malcolm frowned.

“No, my lord, but she’s up to mischief.” Harrow pulled a folded bit of parchment from the satchel on his saddle, and he handed it to the marquess. “I intercepted that.”

Malcolm unfolded it and read. The letter, addressed to him and the King of Night, was unfinished.

We the people of Reedlet, as signed below, demand the immediate release of Hrafn of the Vanir. Her arrest after her heroic deeds the day the birds attacked is an egregious act of injustice that must be made right at once. We, the undersigned, attest that we witnessed no wrongdoing by the accused during the day in question. She acted most valiantly.

The rest of the letter had been rubbed out, the ink blurred. There were at least twenty signatures alongside Miss Lindiwe Zuma's, many of them smudged. Malcolm chuckled warmly at the show of support for his mate.

"My lord," Harrow said curtly, "Miss Zuma is creating unrest."

"By demanding that a wrong be righted?" Malcolm snapped. "She's well within her rights to ask for support and pen letters."

"At every market Miss Zuma causes a disturbance. She's harassing the other villagers, waving her petition in their faces, demanding that they see the events her way, instead of—"

"Instead of *your* way?" Malcolm rolled up the petition for safekeeping, and he narrowed his eyes at his land steward, taking him in and not liking what he saw. "I've told you about the monster, the phantom nesting in the forest. I've stated plainly that Hrafn is innocent of the accusation you brought upon her. You were wrong, Harrow. Time to stiffen that upper lip of yours and move on."

"My lord, all due respect, but you weren't there. You haven't seen what Lindiwe is up to, spreading her lies, ignoring others when she's told to be silent on the matter." He shook his head in disbelief. "You can't mean to take the word of this . . . this . . ."

"Woman," Malcolm said, helping him along. "I'll never understand a mortal man's difficulty when it comes to women who stand up for themselves. Why is your word more valuable to me than hers?"

Harrow's nostrils flared. "I just want what's best for Reedlet."

"You want what's best for yourself," Malcolm said, his blood warming in his veins. Harrow's mouth opened to protest, but he wisely snapped it shut again.

When the matter with the monster was dealt with, Malcolm would see to it that Harrow was removed as one of his stewards. The man continued to point his finger when the real person responsible was a wicked phantom and his own foolish self. He'd been the one to disturb those tombstones, defacing the runes. Magic or not, he carried far more blame than he was willing to admit.

"Go home," Malcolm growled. "Leave Miss Zuma be. All you need to be doing right now is making sure everyone stays far away from that forest until I deal with the monster. Anything else is inconsequential."

Harrow shuffled his feet and muttered under his breath a vague agreement. "For how long?"

"Soon." Malcolm closed the distance between them, squaring his shoulders with the man. Solis grew behind him, casting him in formidable shadow. "Can you handle this, Harrow?"

Harrow hesitated a moment, defiance in his pursed lips. Then he nodded. "I can handle it, my lord. 'Course I can."

The steward yanked on his horse's reins, turning the mount. The gates parted loudly for him.

Malcolm waited until Harrow was good and gone before he returned to the keep. He found Hrafn in her bedroom, mending a tear in her jerkin with needle and thread. She sat the work aside as he made his presence known, leaning in the doorway.

Malcolm hoisted the rolled petition Lindiwe had made, and his lips quirked. “You have an admirer,” he said. He explained the situation, and while he spoke, Solis left him to cozy up beside Hrafn’s shadows.

“It is good of her to show such care,” Hrafn said.

“You saved her life. She feels indebted.”

“I’d like to know she’s not being harassed as a result of having faith in me. I’ll send her a letter to reassure her that I’m well and to check on her in turn, but I speak Common better than I write it.”

“I could help you,” he offered, a hint of caution in his words. The night before had been glorious, but it was time for practicality. If he was smart, he’d avoid sharing moments with her alone in her chambers.

We’re not smart, Solis said. Be an idiot, I say.

Hrafn’s face fell. She hesitated, licking her lips. “Ezra is gifted with languages. He will help me craft it before he carries the letter to Lindiwe in Reedlet. He knows where her market stall is.”

“If you change your mind, you know how to find me.” This was the wise thing, the safe thing, keeping their distance, building walls. Still, as he backed into the hall, his heart plummeted.

He returned moments later to fetch Solis. His stubborn soul wouldn’t leave Hrafn’s side. Hrafn observed the exchange with a bittersweet twist to her lips.

“Sorry,” Malcolm grunted, gathering up his tendrils of darkness and dragging his shadow out of the room.

* * *

The first day of autumn, it rained. A week had passed since Malcolm had shared a bed with his mate.

“Do I have to?” Malcolm droned, water slicking his hair.

“This was your idea,” Hrafn reminded him, standing before the oaken barrel they’d dragged into the courtyard together. She removed a wooden hammer from her belt. Shielding herself from the downpour with her wings uplifted, she held out the tool to him. They’d finished another round of exercises that morning, and Malcolm was missing his favorite drink. It was the one vice he couldn’t seem to stay entirely away from, so he’d flippantly suggested removing the temptation.

“It was a terrible idea,” he groaned.

“I’ll do it if you can’t. I think you’re right that too much wine slows you down. You work your shadows better without it.” She raised the wooden hammer.

“No, no, give me that.” Malcolm took it from her. “Gods, forgive me, Red,” he said with a great heaving sigh. He raised the hammer high. He brought it down over the spigot and broke off the tap. The wine ran out onto the lawn, wetting the bottom of his boots, soaking the ground, speckling the grass in crimson.

The rain had turned Hrafn’s wings glossy. As they watched the downpour wash away his favorite drink, he nearly reached out to stroke along the plumes but remembered himself. They were being careful now.

They’d stopped cooking together. He didn’t visit her at night. When they weren’t training, she hunted in the woods with her familiar in her nighthawk form, scouting the darkness. The little child-like shadows grew together and thickened. Clapa made jewelry out of buttons for Margot and Susan. The women wore the charms with pride. Malcolm enjoyed their

companionship, even as his mind drifted constantly to the one whose company he craved the most.

It was the safe thing, building walls between them this way. And it was a terrible, lonely thing. The singularity of it all was so much more oppressive when the mate he longed for was right there, in his reach.

Briefly he daydreamed about leaving it all behind, abandoning his estate to its fate to follow his mate. He'd take her to see her Manna-heim. They'd travel the world in search of adventure, but this land had been entrusted to him by his father and his mother, and he'd already failed them once in an unforgiveable fashion. He couldn't bring himself to do it twice.

Although he didn't favor the oppressive obligation, he did feel a duty to his people. He'd been tended to, served, provided for—spoiled even—all his life by those who farmed the grounds and worked in his home to make the grand manor and this fortress what they were. He owed them a lord's protection and a lord's leadership.

He would give them both.

Overwhelmed, Malcolm began unknotting his neckcloth and loosening the fastenings on his waistcoat, stripping to the linen undershirt.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Going for a run," he said.

"In all this?" Hrafn held out her palm and the rain filled it in seconds.

"Yes," he said, then he took off at a jog. Quickly his muscles warmed and his head cleared. His body was used to this routine now. The rain transformed from droplets of biting cold to a soothing beat that chilled his brow. He weaved between the out-buildings and circled the granite tower. Then he felt a familiar gust of air by his ear and glanced behind him.

Hrafn flew at his side.

He picked up speed, wanting to expend the pent-up anxiety he felt tightening his stomach. What had been overwhelming when he started now felt like a revelation. There was cleansing clarity in working his body raw.

They sprinted around the courtyard, but it didn't feel like enough. It wasn't exhausting him as quickly as he wanted. He just couldn't outrun his feelings or his worries, couldn't run fast enough to make time stop, to make that horrible pending goodbye stay far away.

Hrafn landed lightly on his back, gripping his shoulders and hooking her legs around his waist. The added resistance helped, but her light body wasn't enough.

Hrafn spread her wings wide, catching the wind and adding weight to his steps, and that was better.

"When I need to work through something," Hrafn said in his ear, "it helps me to shout about it. Curses serve best."

Malcolm swore loudly, pumping his arms and legs, boots sinking into wet ground.

"Sidhek," she said. "Curses are better in Olden. It means 'to hell.' You try it."

"Sidhek," he shouted, and she was right. It was better.

"Louder," she taunted. "Or is this how you go into battle? Quiet as a mouse?"

This was exactly what he needed. To be pushed to his limits and to release his feelings into the void. He roared at the sky, and Hrafn shouted with him. He felt their shared war cry pumping through his pulse, igniting his veins.

Tired to his core, he reached that part of the courtyard where they'd started, where the broken barrel continued to dribble wine. Rain made his

clothes heavy. He jogged to a halt and then dropped into the grass. Hrafn rolled off his back and landed beside him, grinning ear to ear, a smile so rare and precious he forced his mind to capture the moment. He'd hold on to it forever.

Parts of the wet lawn were still stained in red. He turned onto his stomach and pretended to suck his favorite drink out of the grass. Hrafn burst out laughing. She grabbed her belly, her eyes crinkling and her cheeks full of joy.

The sound of it was magic. He wanted to inhale the beautiful song of her mirth, wanted it under his skin, contained within forever. Malcolm sidled in beside her and cupped her cheek. A drop of rain caught in her thick lashes. She blinked it away. As she licked her lips, her throat bobbed. She caught the wrist that held her face, and squeezed.

He felt the hesitation in her hold, the worry. They were being careful, that touch said.

Malcolm kissed her anyway. Because he had to. He had to just one last time. Her lips molded to his, and he tasted the rain on her.

No, don't do it, Solis said. Not now.

Now was the only time. He had to do it while he was strong. While he had the clarity of mind given to him after he'd worked his muscles raw.

"I love you," he told her, his lips inches from hers, his breath misting in the cold brought on by the storm. "I love you, and you have to go. Right now. Leave."

Hrafn turned on her side to face him fully, her breath heating the space between them. "Now?"

"Now," Malcolm said.

Solis melted into a puddle at his back and sobbed.

“The monster—”

Malcolm shook his head. “I don’t need you for the monster,” he confessed. “I was rusty at first. I needed your help then, but I haven’t needed you for some time now.” He knew she would doubt and stress, so he pressed on to free her of that burden. “After my parents died, I returned here. My father kept phantoms as servants, but shadows shouldn’t be kept like that, especially not creatures made from the darkness. They need freedom to do what they do, to chase the light. One phantom turned on my father and whispered madness in his ears. When I arrived, I ripped them all to pieces and sent them off. So you see, I can handle one phantom, even if it does have a little piece of god soul.”

She worked her throat. “How many were there?”

“Hundreds.”

Her chin trembled. “But there are beasts in those woods poisoned by the monster. I can keep the beasts away while you—”

“No.” That was what they’d discussed. But that wasn’t necessary either and he knew it. It was time she did too. “I have a plan for all that, but I haven’t enacted it because of you. Because that monster keeps you here with me, and I hate saying goodbye. So I won’t say goodbye. I’ll just say I love you. I’ll just tell you that you will always be welcome at Reedholm should you decide to take a break from your adventures. I’ll tell you I’m so damn jealous that you get to travel, but also glad you’ll finally be free. You deserve that happiness, Hrafn pidd maldrom.”

“Malcolm,” she said, and her voice cracked.

“Go. Go and remember me.”

“Always,” she said, and she touched her brow to his. Rain dripping between them, she hung there, hesitating. “Come with me.” The words

were a desperate whisper so full of longing it made his bones ache.

He exhaled slowly, trying to push the clinging emotions far away before they knotted him up and he melted into a puddle before her just like his soul had. “You know I can’t do that.”

“I want to change your mind,” she breathed. “I . . . I just can’t think how.”

“Please. Please don’t make this harder on me.”

As she climbed to her feet, Malcolm remained in the grass, hot tears mingling with the rain, dripping down his face, gathering in the scruff on his jaw. He didn’t watch her leave, couldn’t bring himself to do it.

He rolled onto his back, the ground slurping around him, allowing the downpour to pelt his body. He didn’t move from that place in the courtyard for what felt like an age.

Hrafn was gone from the fortress. He felt it in their blooming bond the moment she departed. The bond disliked it almost as much as he did. His heart was an open wound in his chest.

I hate you, Solis wept.

“I hate me too,” Malcolm said.

* * *

The following morning, Malcolm joined what remained of the small child-like shadows in the sitting room. There were only two littles left. Lumpy and Ember, the last shadows were called, and after absorbing the others and growing, they were about the size of two small toddlers made of smog.

He knew Margot and Susan had grown attached. He brought them along so they could say their goodbyes. Clapa too—she watched the

goings on, perched in his hair, holding his antlers.

Malcolm rocked the clumpy lumps of darkness in his lap, waiting for their final moment of merging.

“Are you ready?” he asked Solis.

His shadow bristled, still testy about his dismissal of their mate from the day before. Malcolm felt numb about the whole thing, like he’d cut off his own arm and his body had gone into shock, and now he couldn’t feel anything at all.

They’d been resisting this moment. It was one of the reasons the little shadows hadn’t formed together yet. It didn’t usually take quite so long. He and Solis hadn’t wanted to fully acknowledge the pull of their full strength. That way, they might still need Hrafn.

“Come on now,” Malcolm said. “It’s time to do what’s best for them.”

Solis pouted. *What about what’s best for us?*

“We do our duty,” Malcolm said to his soul. “That’s what’s best for us.”

Grumbling, Solis joined with him, and Malcolm winced; the sharp stab of heartbreak in his soul pinched his chest and made his stomach go hard.

Margot sniffled. “Goodbye Lumpy, goodbye Ember.” From Malcolm’s head, Clapa chittered at her comfortingly.

“Aw,” Susan said, putting an arm around her friend’s shoulder. “There, there.” Her blue eyes were watery.

The shadowy lumps warmed on his lap, and then they came together, the same way Solis had come together with him. Malcolm stood, and the shadow took to the air. It circled Margot first in farewell, stirring her skirts, then Susan, weaving between the two women affectionately. Parting

from them, it met Clapa midair. It surrounded her and spun her about, and the fairy child giggled and snorted.

Malcolm crossed to the balcony and pushed open the glass door. Slowly, the reformed shadow followed him.

“Go on,” he said warmly.

It hesitated there, like a storm cloud without any wind to push it onward. He ran his fingers through its dark mass. It felt like mist, and he smiled a sad smile. The shadow flew out over the balcony.

It had a new master now, but shadows needed to be free. They needed to chase the light. In that way, he was more like their father, because if a father loved his children, he let them grow up and move on.

Without him.

A lump grew in his throat as he watched the shadow float away from the balcony. Margot and Susan came to stand on either side of him. They locked their arms in his, and he was grateful for the contact. He let them comfort him.

“I told you not to name them,” he said, and his voice broke.

“Aw, you poor dear,” Susan said. “You didn’t want us to name them because it’s harder on you, isn’t it?”

Malcolm nodded. “I spend so much time with them, it’s difficult not to get attached.” And that was true enough, but of course his mind had drifted to a different goodbye, a bittersweet one in the rain.

He wondered how far Hrafn had gotten in one night. She was a fast flyer, especially in her nighthawk form. Perhaps the Lunar Province was already behind her.

“I did what you asked,” Susan said, pulling him out of his thoughts. “I had a conversation with the willow tree in the courtyard there. I always

feel so weird when I do that, but it's the best way to get in touch with the Queen of Night."

"Thank you," Malcolm said. Now that his mate, a fugitive from justice, was nowhere to be found, summoning Queen Rain here didn't worry him. She would help their friends get home where they belonged.

"It sounds so strange to hear myself saying that," Susan said, "that I summon the blimming queen by talking to trees."

But it didn't sound strange to Malcolm at all. The Bloody Queen of Night was Seelie, just like his mother had been. The Seelie had an unmatched affinity with nature. In the way that the shadows were his friends, the trees were beloved of the queen.

"What'd you tell Rain?" Margot wondered.

"I told her about the mad beasts that are barring our road home," Susan said. "And I asked her if she wouldn't mind escorting us back into the city after tending to them."

"Lovely," Margot said. "If she's still in River Row, it'll just be a few hours now. Not that I'm ungrateful for you having us here," she added quickly, "but I miss my own bed."

"Understandable," Malcolm said with a sigh. And it was relatable because he missed a great many things already.

Malcolm kept to the sitting room to watch for signs of Rain, the Queen of Night. He took his meals there and tried to read something, tried to craft a letter to Reedholm to check in with his estate manager. He was too distracted to manage much.

Clapa, as though she sensed that he was distraught, came to keep him company. She presented him with one of the brass buttons he'd given her,

tied to a piece of string. She'd used her claws to carve intricate designs into the brass, and she laid it in his palm, glowing with pride.

"Thank you, little one," he said. His smile didn't quite chase the gloomy feeling out of the pit of his stomach.

Clapa seemed unsatisfied with it. She pulled at his lips, tugging the corners upright to make him smile wider, chittering in her happy way. Then she hugged his face and left a wet kiss on his nose, and he found himself chuckling. Satisfied, she returned to his antlers, to hang upside down from them like a bat, chattering at him merrily.

"You don't say," he told her, having no idea what she was going on about without Hrafn and Ezra near to help interpret. Squeezing her gift between his fingers, he felt a little less hollow anyway. He tucked her gifted button into his pocket.

He hadn't needed to be so vigilant in waiting on the queen. As dusk neared, Rain made her presence well known.

The crash of swaying limbs, the crackle of branches, and the boom of falling brambles was loud in his ears, and then the sound of screaming started, only it wasn't the screams of a person. High pitched and hollow, it carried from the woods across the lawn, over the walls, and into the keep.

Margot and Susan returned to the sitting room and joined him on the balcony.

Susan covered her ears. "It always gives me the willies when the trees scream like that."

Margot's smile was wide and a little unhinged. "I love it," she said.

"Anta Rat," Clapa cheered, and she danced in Malcolm's hair.

Wolves howled and then yelped. Trees broke and smashed and banged. Limbs elongated, and leaves and bramble tumbled. Even with his keen

eyes, it was hard to see everything from this distance. Birds flew into the sky and were snatched back by grasping vines.

Then all at once the forest went still.

Malcolm squinted into the fading light. Overhead the sky was purple and overcast. A cloaked figure stepped out from the trees.

“Rain,” Susan said. “Come on, Margot, let’s load up the carriage.”

They took turns hugging Malcolm around his middle.

Because his friends were gifted at seeing too much, Margot added, “This isn’t goodbye, you know.” She pinched his arm affectionately. “Just see you soon.”

“I appreciate that,” he said, and his voice had gone hoarse.

They left the room, chatting about the plans they had for after their return to their brothel in River Row. Slowly their voices and laughter faded. And then they were gone.

In the distance, white hair hung from the hood of the cloaked figure. The queen raised a gloved hand to him. He waved in return and bowed his head with gratitude. Circling her feet was a small black cat, Rain’s demon familiar.

“Anta Rat,” Clapa said, pointing at the queen. Then to the cat, she added, “Pap pap Hiss Hiss. Attaway.”

“Is it time for you to go, too?” he guessed.

The fairy nodded her sharp chin. “Attaway, Mal Mal?”

“Attaway,” he said. “Thank you for helping me, Clapa. You were brilliant.”

She tied a knot in his hair, then hugged his face one last time, squeezing his cheeks. The tips of her tiny claws scraped gently over his stubble. As she flew to join her family, bat-like wings buzzing behind her,

the cat bounded forward to meet her. She jetted across the courtyard and beyond the walls, her little arms outstretched. Alighting on the cat's back, she tugged affectionately on his ears.

The gates rumbled as they parted. Two heavy horses pulled a carriage forward through them, carrying his companions back to where they belonged.

Malcolm was alone.

You're never really alone, Solis said.

"That's true," Malcolm said, and in the encroaching darkness, the air had cooled significantly. Chirruping insects cut through the quiet. He felt hollow again. "Are we ready for the monster?"

Midday tomorrow, Solis suggested, *when the sun is bright and at its highest point. That would be best.*

"Midday then," Malcolm agreed.

His mind wanted to drift to Hrafn, to wonder where she was, to picture her sleeping under the stars. He didn't dwell, but he hoped she was thinking of him too.

He slept like the dead that night, deep and dreamless and numb.

* * *

Noon the following day came quickly for him because he spent most of the morning in bed. Malcolm slept late, then he rang for breakfast and ate little of it. Still combined with Solis, he dressed in leathers, strapped his favorite sword to his back, and went for a light jog to warm up his muscles.

Before ordering the gates opened, he visited the copse of weeping willow trees. The willows were tall and old. The shade formed by aged living things was always the most stubborn. Predominantly stationary, tree shadows were accustomed to only moving a certain way at certain times of the day.

But he was the god of shadows.

“Come,” he said, and the shadows left their tree reluctantly to gather around him.

We’re ready, Solis said, a hint of excitement in his tone. It had been a long while since they’d adventured in such a way.

The gates parted at Malcolm’s word. Where the grass hid in the shade, the morning dew stubbornly clung, cooling around his boots. The whinny of a horse brought him up short. Stepping out of the shade, he shielded his eyes to take in the rider.

“Harrow,” Malcolm said, his nostrils flaring. “What now?”

Harrow was unshaved and his clothing rumpled. The scent of alcohol clung to him. “Miss Zuma spreads lies, my lord.”

He’s not right, Solis warned, casting himself before him.

“Should you be riding in your condition?” Malcolm grumbled.

Harrow scoffed. His eyes were unfocused. “Just a little spirits in my coffee, my lord. I’m fit as a fiddle.”

“You’re drunk, is what you are,” he scolded. “You’re going to get yourself killed or severely injure your mount, or both. Go sober up in Skugborg, then be off with you.”

“Is it true?” Harrow stammered out, ignoring the direct order, and Malcolm bristled at his defiance. For a moment, he imagined pulling the

foolish man right off his horse, letting the ground knock some sense into him. “Is the witch really going to be freed?”

Malcolm gritted his teeth. His mate was already free, and the reminder that she was out there and not with him put a knot in his stomach. “As I’ve said in my letters, the phantom in the forest is the creature res—”

“You can’t free her, my lord,” Harrow pleaded.

He’s definitely not right, Solis repeated.

Malcolm was too angry to be cautious. “What’d you do?” he demanded, his hands fisting at his sides. “Where’s Miss Zuma?”

Harrow’s eyes went glassy. “The girl is fine. More than fine. She’s got half the village disparaging me now. If the witch goes free that’ll be it for me. I’ll be ruined.”

Malcolm’s jaw set. His nails dug into the palms of his hands. “You came here to beg me to keep an innocent woman confined for what? Your blasted pride?”

“Not my pride.” Harrow rubbed a hand down his leathery face, stretching his lined skin. “For what’s best—”

“Don’t give me that tired line, Harrow, you fool. You don’t care what’s best for Reedlet. Sober up. Go home and start searching for a new post.” Malcolm couldn’t look at him anymore. Harrow was lucky there was no honor in hurting groselings, because he’d never wanted to hurt one more. “I have work to do here and no time for your nonsense.”

Malcolm stomped toward the tree line, nothing but heavy silence at his back. He left Harrow there to make his choice, but he wasn’t going to parent the foolish mortal. Harrow could go sober up at the fortress like a man with sense or keep sitting there, staring into space until the end of time, for all he cared.

As Malcolm neared the trees, shadows parted for him. Taking on the phantom would be easier than he imagined. The monster had been weakened greatly by the loss of the shadows Malcolm had reformed. Deeper into the forest he pressed. Sunlight streamed in through the canopy. The ground was littered with broken branches and impaled animal corpses.

He searched for the deep darkness, pulling the shadows out of his way so that the monster could not conceal itself from him. The deeper into the forest he traveled, the darker it became. Not all of the animals had been slain; he heard the chitter of squirrels and birds calling to each other.

He spotted the phantom then. It retreated from him rather than parting at his word. Malcolm pursued it, leaping over limbs, dodging low-hanging branches.

He heard movement and was certain another animal was prowling nearby, something with heavier steps. And then a weight crashed down on the side of his head and black spots popped before his eyes. The blow knocked him to the ground and dazed him.

Malcolm blinked up at the emerald canopy above him. His vision swam. The shadow before him came slowly into focus, but it wasn't a shadow.

Harrow lifted the large tree branch and hit him once more. Malcolm blocked the blow with crossed arms. Harrow pulled a pistol from his pocket and trained the short barrel on the marquess's face. The iron weapon was forbidden in the fae lands, but that didn't stop the odd firearm from finding its way into the pockets of mortals, especially out in the country.

Solis pulled into Malcolm's body. A touch of iron would destroy his vulnerable soul, and what if Harrow had gotten his hands on one of those

sintered iron bullets? Hell, a lead bullet to his heart or in his head would kill him just the same.

Malcolm froze. His mind took ages to catch up with him. He hadn't been expecting a person to follow him into the woods, had no idea Harrow would dare turn violent. He'd underestimated the mortal.

"Why?" Malcolm croaked and stars popped before his eyes.

"Because you're the worst sort of lord," he barked and the hand holding the weapon shook. "You've ruined me!"

"Gods, Harrow, put the blazing pistol down!"

"The worst," he screamed, and the whites of his eyes shone wildly. "You neglect your duties in favor of wine and women. You're the worst sort of scoundrel. You don't even try to hide your whoring and debauchery and drunkenness, and you have the gall to lecture me about a little drink in my coffee! You're no lord at all!"

In the distance, birds rustled in the branches and a hawk screeched. The scent of sulfur burned in the air. Solis cheered. Laughter rumbled out of Malcolm. The mirth made his head hurt. Something hot and wet slid down his temple from the new wound on the side of his head.

Harrow cocked the weapon and aimed it at his face. "What are you laughing at, damn you?"

"You got the jump on me, Harrow," Malcolm said, "I'll give you that. You've always been a good woodsman who knows these lands like the back of his hand. But you missed my mate."

Harrow lifted his eyes just as Ezra swooped at his face. He fired off a wild shot. The bullet lodged into a tree, and bark flew.

Hrafn alighted from the branch overhead in her nighthawk form. Midair her wings came around her and she transformed. She landed on

Harrow, taking him to the ground with her weight. Gripping him by his chin, she jerked his head to the side, and his spine snapped with an audible crunch. Light left his eyes and his body fell limp.

Hrafn took a stabilizing breath. Then she sidled over to Malcolm and extended a hand down to him. He stared at her a moment, convincing himself that she was actually there. That he wasn't dead and dreaming peacefully amongst the stars.

If he was, he'd take it, frankly, so long as she was there too.

We're alive, Solis shouted, now touch her!

He took her hand, her grip callused and familiar, and she helped him stand. Blood trickled from the fresh wound at his scalp and ran hot down his temple. He swayed on his feet, and she steadied him.

"Killed him with your bare hands. Not bad," he said.

Hrafn scowled. "He deserved a slower death, but with a pistol in his hand, I didn't want to take the chance."

Malcolm's cheeks hurt, his smile was so broad. "You're not supposed to be here."

"Unfinished business. I couldn't go just yet," she said softly, lashes low. "You were being stubborn. I promised myself I wouldn't interfere unless you needed me. I had to see this through, had to know you were all right, so I waited."

"And I needed you," Malcolm noted. "Thank you for saving me." He wobbled again and Hrafn braced him.

He stared at the place where their hands were clasped. He could pull her in. Hold her. Kiss her. Thank her properly.

Do it, Solis begged.

Malcolm sighed. It would only make the second inevitable goodbye that much harder.

Sensing his struggle, Hrafn dropped his arm. "I'll watch your back," she vowed. "Go rip apart that damn monster like the shadow god you are."

Malcolm moved through the trees with renewed purpose. The darkness stopped retreating. It was wounded, he sensed, first by him stripping away those shadows and reforming them, then further injured by the attack of trees. Wary, he motioned for Hrafn to stay back.

It's talking to me, Solis said, and he separated from Malcolm, casting his shade across the grass and the raised tree roots.

Phantoms only want to whisper madness, Malcolm warned. "Come here," he commanded the darkness, and the first tendrils moved in reach. He ripped it apart, handful by handful.

Solis grew and thickened into his wraith-like form. *Wait*, he said, but Malcolm ignored him. He plucked and tore at the shadows.

Wait! Solis shouted, swooping in beside him. *The monster is willing to return to its cage!*

Malcolm's nostrils flared. With a flustered grunt, he continued to pull the darkness in around him and claw through them with his fingers, dropping tiny little base shadows onto the forest floor.

Stop, Solis screamed in his ear. Then he grabbed Malcolm's hand at the wrist. *If it returns to its cage, Hrafn will have to stay too.*

Malcolm snarled at his soul, lip curled. "I want a partner, a lover, not a prisoner."

Solis roared in his face and clung to his arm, and Malcolm slowed.

"Hrafn," Malcolm rasped, straining against his soul, and he heard her sidling closer. "You have to run. You have to run now, and you cannot let

Solis catch you this time. Fly fast.”

She didn’t ask questions. They were mates—trust and affection would burn between them always. Hrafn’s wings unfurled, and she shot into the air.

No, Solis begged, tearing after her.

Malcolm picked and plucked and ripped and tore at the darkness until there was nothing left on the forest floor but dozens of baby shadows, and a glowing piece of soul in the palm of his hand. The bit of god soul was hard and shaped like a tear drop. He tucked it into his pocket beside the brass button Clapa gifted him.

Then he sat down on the ground, resting his back against a tree trunk, and the shadow babies gathered around him, seeking reassurance, because they were hurting and scared. He held them and waited.

* * *

Hrafn

Leaving the fortress, knowing she wouldn’t return, had made Hrafn feel like she’d been torn in two. A part of her, a crucial part, like her very own heart, had been left behind with Malcolm. She and Ezra made it as far as their old home before they took to the ground.

They spent the day hunting animals touched by the monster, and then the trees shook and screamed and they’d run for their lives. Malcolm had told her stories of the Queen of Night during training and when they ate together. The trees battled for the Seelie witch. Hrafn had watched her

work from a distance, clearing the forest in moments with magic that made her jaw drop.

At midday, Malcolm had come into the forest. She'd sensed him in the bond as he'd drawn near, and even though it hadn't been long at all since they'd seen each other last, it felt as if they'd been separated for ages.

"I want a partner, a lover, not a prisoner," he'd said to his soul.

She loved him for that, for freeing her despite the misery it caused him. For his strength and his selflessness, he was a worthy mate.

Hrafn flew fast and hard, Solis just behind her. She could hear him whispering at her but still couldn't make out what he was saying. He'd grown louder in their time together. The bond fluttered in her chest, a compelling sensation.

Hrafn rose above the tree canopy and gained a new burst of speed in the open air. Ezra tried to help, flying at Solis to slow him, but his efforts would simply pass straight through the shadowy form.

They circled the forest and headed toward Reedlet. Hrafn wound a wide path back toward the River Eventide. She wouldn't be able to keep up this speed forever. Malcolm needed to work fast. In the distance, the river rushed over rocks, and then Solis locked his soft satiny grip around her ankle.

She kicked and tried to wrench free, but his grip expanded, winding a dark tendril up her leg, then around her thigh.

"Stop, Malcolm," she said.

The darkness whispered back. A tendril encircled her waist. He pulled on her, offsetting her balance. Hrafn beat her wings, but she was still losing air. They drifted gently toward the ground. He caught her in his shadowy arms when they landed.

His lips moved; words she couldn't make out escaped in a low murmur.

Hrafn touched his velvety cheek. "I know how you feel," she said and her voice broke. "Flying away from you that night was the hardest thing I've ever done. I didn't even make it very far, and now I feel like I've been torn in two. I'm like you. Here and there at the same time."

Solis held her tight to the dark expanse of his chest. He touched his temple to hers.

"Horse," she whispered, her voice thick. Her eyes and throat stung with feeling. She'd underestimated how terrible a second goodbye would make her feel.

Murmuring softly, he set her on her feet and let her go, just like he promised they would when they played together. She felt the loss of his touch. A hollowness grew in the pit of her stomach.

"I don't want to be in a cage." Her chin trembled. Just looking at him put an ache in her chest. "But I don't want to exist ripped in two, either."

He leaned in closer and nuzzled her neck, his murmurs soft and soothing in her ear.

She laid a hand on his chest where his heart should beat. There was nothing there but warmth and gentleness. She touched her own chest and felt the bond thrumming, not just beside her heart, but through it. She wanted her mate to know exactly how important he was to her, exactly how much he meant to her, and then she remembered that he'd already given her the answer.

I need to be chosen first, he'd said.

"I choose you, Malcolm," she told him. "I love you."

I couldn't let you go again, he said, the words echoing through the new link forged between them. The bond had settled, imprinting in her heart. *Once was too much already.*

Hrafn wrapped her arms around his neck. “But you did let me go, and that’s why I choose you.”

Chapter 14



Malcolm

With help from Hrafn and Solis, Malcolm brought the little balls of broken shadow back to the fortress to eat hot coals from the fire and to sleep in the sunlight.

“The monster is really gone?” Hrafn asked. She’d kept to the balcony, arms folded, looking uneasy.

Malcolm reassured her. He showed her the tiny bit of soul he’d salvaged from the shadowy remains. It appeared to be as harmless as a piece of stone. “It’s truly over. Your cage is gone and so is your monster.”

Hrafn bit her lip.

Perhaps because of the true mate bond settling between them, Malcolm understood exactly what it was that made her shoulders tense and her eyes dim without her having to speak a word.

“You intend to travel tonight.”

Her eyes widened in surprise. Then she sighed. “I need out of this province before I scratch my skin off,” she said. “I’m restless, Malcolm. Restless, but completely and hopelessly in love.”

Malcolm laughed, but there was no humor in it. “I knew you would need to travel. How long will you be gone?”

“Just a couple of days, I think. I’ll come back to you. You believe that, don’t you?”

“Of course,” he said, and he knew he’d failed to conceal the pinch of grief that edged his voice. He took her arm at the elbow and spoke with more confidence. “I wish I could go, is all. Don’t fret over me.”

“We wouldn’t be gone long,” she said. “I haven’t visited the living trees of the Seelie just north of the river since the war. I’d like to see them again. Are you sure you can’t tag along this time?”

Malcolm gestured at the little nuggets that circled his feet. Another was rolling up the wall so that it could lick the gas lamp. “I need to look after all of them, and I haven’t been to Reedholm in too long. I can’t keep neglecting my estate. I have to go home now, but I’ll wait for you there.”

“All right.” Disappointed but not deterred, she added, “Good—”

“It’s not a goodbye,” he said firmly, cutting her off. “Just ‘see you soon.’”

* * *

Malcolm arrived at Reedholm first thing the next morning. He filled his days writing letter after letter, most of which he sent to his friend, the King of Night, detailing the demise of the monster in the woods. After that, he held meetings with his land stewards, meetings with his clerks and his secretary and his estate manager. Harrow had to be replaced. Order needed to be restored.

More barrels of red wine had to be purchased.

Between his work and tending to the little shadows, he was able to remain distracted enough that he didn’t pester his true mate. With a

thought he could call to her, but he knew if he did, she might cut her trip short, and that wasn't fair to her.

For more than three centuries she'd been trapped here with people who had forgotten about her, people who knew nothing of her sacrifices. She deserved to have an adventure. But then another day passed, and another day came and went.

Mail arrived on day three, a letter in a fat envelope of thick vellum from the King of Night. He opened it and read:

To the Mad Marquess of Reedholm,

I have received ALL of your many, many letters detailing the innocence of your mate. Attached is no less than five copies of the decree attesting that Hrafn of the Vanir is cleared of all charges brought against her. Your mate is a free woman. Even though only my name is needed, I decided to indulge you out of gratitude for your recent service. As you requested, on each copy below my sovereign signature is that of a high-ranking mage and no less than two magistrates.

My bloody bride and I were cheered to hear the news of your recent true mating. We'd love for you to visit with us at the manor in River Row soon. Rain has heard a great deal about Hrafn. She would like to meet her in the flesh. In the meantime, do take care.

Your Friend,

The Less Bloody King of Night

On day four, Malcolm sat in a sunny drawing room at Reedholm, tending to the shadows. He wondered why they weren't reforming as quickly as

he'd anticipated. He reflected on it. These shadows were interested in him, but they didn't obey his every summons. They resisted him at times.

His days at Skugborg had taught Malcolm that being a neglectful master put him as much at risk of betrayal as being reckless had for his father. He pulled his soul inside him and embraced his darkness. The nuggets of shadow came to him easily then. He sat in his chair, covered in dots of smog, rocking them to sleep.

"You are like babies," he confessed, "and I've been a terrible father." He knew how to change that, though.

Do you still hate me? he asked his soul.

I never did, not really, Solis said. *But I especially like where our thoughts are headed now.*

I do too, Malcolm said, because their thoughts were on Hrafn again, their true mate who was willing to sacrifice her freedom for them. They thought about their mother, too, the only other woman who could claim to have loved them just as much, if in a very different way.

Be happy, my son, his mother had said in her final farewell. *Not see to the estate or honor your duty.* She'd wanted him *happy*. How had he gone and gotten that so wrong? He was anything but happy now. The idea of abandoning Reedholm had felt selfish. But how could it be selfish when he was doing it for someone else entirely so they could both be free?

Because Malcolm deserved to be happy too.

* * *

Malcolm tried so hard to give his true mate her much-deserved space. She needed this travel, needed to explore, to flex her wings, and learn new

things. But he missed her in the deepest parts of himself. The walls of Reedholm had never felt so much like the bars of a cell. He felt chained to his desk, writing letters all day long, taking meetings, discussing herds, fielding complaints that made him bored, made him want to drink his favorite wine and forget.

On the fifth day of her absence, he gave in, sending her a message with his thoughts.

Hrafn. Just in that one word it was impossible to hide his longing, his loneliness, his worry. He wanted to ask her if it was hard to come home, if she wanted to return at all. He didn't, because he loved and trusted his mate, but he felt haunted by those worries.

I'm coming home, Hrafn said, and there was a happiness in her voice that made him feel great pleasure and then crushing remorse. *I saw living trees. I picked mangoes for a villager who taught me how to ride a tiger like it was a horse. The jungles are magical here. It was incredible! I wish you were with me.*

Her excitement was infectious. She'd finally gotten out of her cage; how could he ever shove her back into a new one?

How close are you?

I'm flying your way right now. I'll be home tonight.

Malcolm unlocked his bedroom windows and pushed them open wide. She'd never been to Reedholm, never had a tour, but he was confident she'd be able to follow their bond straight to him. As he sunk into his bed, he felt his body relax. It was a comfort knowing she'd be there soon, and he drifted off to sleep.

His dreams were vivid and full of lust. He dreamed of his mate. In one of them, the very second she flew into the room through the window, he

caught her up in his shadows and stripped her bare. Then he sat her on his face, reliving the first time he'd pleased her.

He awoke to find sunlight streaming into his chambers. Malcolm was still in bed, and he wasn't alone. He actually had stripped his mate bare the second she flew into the room.

Hrafn straddled Solis's face beside him. His wraith-like arms cupped her bare ass. His tongue roved between her legs. Malcolm was so hard it hurt.

"This is the best welcome I've ever gotten," Hrafn said, breathless. She braced herself on the headboard.

Malcolm rose to his knees, his cock tenting his drawers. He took her by the hips and pressed her lower over Solis's mouth. "My shadow form doesn't need to breathe," he soothed when he felt her stiffen. "You can't hurt me like this. That's it, love." He helped her roll her hips, encouraging her to chase her pleasure.

When her breaths escaped her in pants, he left the bed and gathered oil he kept in the nightstand. He shucked his drawers, then slid in behind his mate on his knees, passing straight through Solis's body sprawled beneath her. His cock jutted before him, twitching and full. He rested the blunt head against her lower back, letting her natural movements tease him.

"I want your ass," he told her.

"It's yours," Hrafn rasped.

Malcolm bent her forward so that her weight leaned against the headboard. Solis continued his enthusiastic work, lapping up her pleasure like it was the nectar of the gods and he was a starved worshiper. Malcolm tasted her salty sweetness on his own tongue through his soul, and moisture pearled at his tip.

He uncorked the bottle of oil, and a peppery fragrance filled his nose. Tipping the bottle, he added a dollop to her lower back and more to his hand. He fisted his cock, smearing the member with the oil. Malcolm worked his palms over her back and down the crease of her ass. Her skin was hot and gleaming.

“More,” she gasped.

Malcolm poured generously, then he corked the bottle and set it aside. He rubbed her body, spreading the fragrant oil from her lower back, down the curves of her ass, wetting the delicate crease of her bottom. Malcolm teased her puckered back entrance with the pad of his finger. Hrafn pressed against him, working the single digit into her body.

When she moaned, Malcolm took hold of his cock and squeezed. Gods, the sounds she made reverberated straight through him, warming the bond in his heart. She rocked her hips, moving over his finger, crooning when he slowly added a second digit. Each time the tight ring of intimate muscles relaxed and took him a little deeper, his pulse surged. With his free hand, he uncorked the bottle and poured more oil into his palm, slicking his fingers and himself until both were dripping.

“More,” she gasped. “I want more.”

Malcolm removed his fingers and rested the crown of his cock at her ass, allowing her to work her body at her own pace. Her hips jerked, inching Malcolm deeper, rubbing that delicious pearl at the crest of her sex against Solis’s hungry mouth. Their bodies slapped together wetly.

“Come,” Malcolm told her, and Solis echoed it. *Come on my face.*

He could feel it when she was close, the sensations mirrored in him. Her breathing went shallow. Her whimpers turned desperate. Hrafn sucked in a ragged breath when she found her release. Surging back, she took him

deep, sheathing him fully, grinding herself shamelessly against that shadowy mouth that was so desperate for her. Malcolm squeezed his eyes shut, feeling her sensitive muscles fist around him.

He didn't want to spend just yet.

Hrafn cried out in Olden and drooped against the headboard. Her wings unfurled and quivered. She was glorious. The sheen of sweat on her bronze skin, the sunlight casting a corona around her dark hair and ebony plumes . . . But she was not finished with him yet, and soon her hips were pistoning again.

"Yes! Yes, yes, fuck me!" she begged.

He met her thrusts, digging his fingers into her waist, matching her pace. His balls tightened and his heart hammered. And Solis was never going to get enough of that lush pussy in his mouth, never going to need air.

Her thighs and back tremored. Malcolm pumped more fiercely as his balls went tight. He saw sparks behind his eyes when he came. Bliss flooded his senses, and his blood pressure plummeted.

They lay in a satisfied heap for a moment, Solis at the bottom of their pile. When Hrafn was ready to stand, they washed up by the basin in his room. He towed her down afterward and then they climbed back into bed, surrounded by bedding that smelled like peppery oil and pleasure.

Hrafn rolled onto her side, and Malcolm joined her, holding her close, their bodies tangling, her wings tucked in tight against her sides. To Malcolm, this felt like home in a way that no walls, no building, ever would.

"I might fall asleep," she warned him drowsily.

Malcolm's arms encircled her. He pulled her tight against him, hands palming her belly. "I'm counting on it."

Solis covered her front with his shadows, nuzzling in close.

He was glad she was here, thrilled to share his bed with her, whatever her violent tendencies. Hrafn dozed off moments later, and when she threw an elbow into his side, Malcolm kissed the back of her head, and only minded a little.

When he was pulled awake next, this time by a flutter of wing in his face, Solis blanketed her in shadows, containing her twists and turns. But now Malcolm was stuck awake. Staring at the ceiling, his mind turned.

This woman was the absolute worst bedmate, but the idea of ever sleeping apart, of her traveling and then dreading coming home, and him waiting for her, feeling trapped and alone—the notion of repeating that could go burn in Hell. He'd do anything to share covers with her every night, even when she hogged them.

He couldn't just abandon the estate, either. It needed a dutiful caretaker. Getting that in place could take ages. It wasn't as simple as hiring someone. Reedholm needed a proper lord . . .

Malcolm sat up in bed, certain he'd finally solved the problem. Solis approved. His soul joined with him, filling his body with air and sunlight. He was too eager to share his plan to wait for Hrafn to rouse on her own. Grinning, he grabbed his pillow and hit her in the face with it—she deserved no less than violent Vanir affection.

Hrafn groaned awake.

As Malcolm explained himself, she stretched and moaned, arms overhead, curving her back like a cat, drawing attention to all her bronze

curves and lean muscles. He rolled her onto her stomach. Her wings flittered, as excited and eager for more play as he was.

While he told her the steps of his scheme, he claimed her body slowly and deeply.

* * *

Malcolm sent a messenger ahead of him to Dagrún's country estate. He had to use a coach to visit it in the middle of the day. A horse would have been faster but the shadowy remains of the phantom in their tiny baby forms wouldn't be separated from him. They cried and demanded attention and acted miserably when he tried to leave them, even with Solis and Hrafn for company.

Solis stayed behind, not wanting to be separated from their mate a moment more. When he tried to bring his soul along, he acted as badly as the little shadows had about being separated from their new master. Malcolm decided he preferred his soul stay too, wanting a piece of himself with Hrafn since she'd only recently returned home. She'd been gone, and he had missed her so, though the trip wouldn't last long.

He arrived just before the midday meal. As he entered the aged manor at the bottom of a muddy hill, located in view of the most northern portion of the River Eventide, he and his train of duckling-like shadows drew eyes from the domestics. The nuggets of darkness bobbed after him in a long line, pouring out of the coach one at a time.

A footman held the front door for them, staring with a furrowed brow as they rolled inside. The butler greeted Malcolm, and his tone turned puzzled, gaze dropping to the escort of shadow babies.

“Lady Elspeth is expecting me,” Malcolm said.

It took the aged butler a moment to gather himself. Spluttering, he led Malcolm into the drawing room to await an audience with the oldest of Dagrún’s daughters. A footman was sent to fetch her.

“Lumpy,” Malcolm grumbled at a clump of smog which had rolled up the wall and now sat perched atop the gas lamp, licking the glass with a soot-colored tongue, leaving behind inky patches that quickly evaporated. He plucked the little one off the lamp and set the puff down on the rug.

When Malcolm righted himself, another bit of shadow had found its way onto the lamp. “Damnit, Ember!” He shooed it off. He’d learned his lesson at Reedholm. Left to their own devices, eventually they’d break through the glass to get at the glow inside.

Elsbeth entered the drawing room, plucking riding gloves off her fingers one at a time, her smile broad, her midnight blue hair wind-swept. The butler pulled the sliding doors shut behind her, granting them their privacy.

“Hello, old man . . . and *babies*,” Elspeth said fondly, stepping carefully around the little balls of shadowy fluff. She paused. “Oh, aren’t you looking especially fancy, Malcolm. What’s the occasion?”

He straightened the lapel of his formal jacket and smoothed the front of his silk cravat. “This is one of the last times I plan to behave like a proper marquess—I thought I should look the part.”

Her brow furrowed. “What are you going on about?”

Malcolm gestured for her to sit. They crossed together to the sofa centered in the room. As she lowered onto the cushion, he sat beside her. “There was a time, not so long ago—not to an immortal anyway—when your father offered me your hand.”

A ball of fluff rolled over the tops of his boots, followed closely by another, then another. He ignored them.

“Ha. I remember. Although we are not blood, you found the idea a little too incestuous.” Studying his face, a line formed between her dark brows. “You *still* feel that way, don’t you?”

“You are, without a doubt, the closest thing I have to living family,” he said.

“I feel the same way about you, since we’re being frank.” Lumpy bleated up at her. She patted his head before continuing. “You’re like a perpetually grumpy big brother, but what are you hinting at here? You’re starting to make me nervous.”

“I’d like to revisit the discussion of us marrying.” Lumpy yelped at him for pats. He ignored the demanding thing, crossing his arms over his chest, determined to teach it manners.

“To what end?” She blinked at him. “And what about your mate? I have no desire to wake up with a Vanir warrior standing over me with a spear aimed at my heart! If a Vanir warrior is going to show up in my bedroom, I’d rather we were—”

“Don’t finish that thought,” he grumped.

Elsbeth chuckled darkly.

“Hrafn is fully in favor of my plan, or I wouldn’t be here,” Malcolm reassured her. “The Vanir didn’t have legal marriages the way we do now. The only thing that united two people was true mating.”

“You want a marriage in name alone, then.” She sat back in her seat, crossing one long leg over the other in padded riding trousers. “To what end?”

“I wish to travel.”

“Lords travel sometimes . . .”

“And I don’t plan to return.”

“Ever?” She shifted on the cushion warily. “Gods . . .”

“I want the option not to. I suppose I would like to see you and your family again at least once or twice before the end of time. That’s why I need you. We could try to name you as my heir and then I’d hand Reedholm over to you, but that’s significantly more complicated and would require solicitors and the drafting and redrafting of wills and filing of papers. It could take months to get it all squared away, and then we could miss something and you might not have all you need. I don’t plan to be easy to find. A legal marriage gives you everything instantaneously. The addition of a spouse is already in the important documents. It’s much simpler.”

“But would it take months you don’t have? I mean, we’re immortal, Malcolm—what’s the hurry?”

“My mate has been in a cage long enough,” he said firmly. “Frankly, so have I.”

“I see.” She bit her gray lip.

“Do you?”

“Not really . . . but I think I’m following the most important bits. You want to marry me so that Reedholm will have a lady in your indefinite absence.”

“A fine lady who will see to the estate’s needs and care for it and its people in the manner they deserve. You’ll be a better lord than I ever was. You’re clever and ambitious, and a vast improvement upon the status quo. And you actually *enjoy* leading. You want to be a lady.”

“Meanwhile, you’ll flitter about the Faelands with your woman,” she said, flourishing her hand.

“And beyond them.”

Elsbeth blew out a harsh breath. “It’s a lot, your estate. The tenants here can be an absolute handful, and my home is much, much smaller than yours. I’ve my father and sisters to help me, too, but it’s still a burden at times, and I’m not even the lord here. It was one thing, accepting a match with you. At least then I’d have a partner to assist in handling it all. And what if I find a mate, and they don’t like that I’m already married off?”

“You would still have your father and sisters to help you. And your staff. And my wealth and whatever partner or partners you wish to take on,” he added pointedly. “And you know me. If I can manage not to let the place crumble all by myself, then you’re bound to excel at it.” Then he sighed. “I confess I haven’t come up with a solution to the problem of you finding a mate who insists on marriage.”

“I do like wealth.” She smiled toothily. “And partners. And excelling.”

“Don’t we all.” Lumpy bleated at him again and he gave in, picking up the ball of fluff and sitting it in his lap. “I should have called you Bleats,” he grouched.

Lost in thought, she tapped a disjointed rhythm into the arm of the sofa and chewed on her cheek. “I’m sorry, Malcolm, but I need more time to think on all this. It’s generous giving me everything, but complicated.”

He was disappointed, but he couldn’t deny that her request was reasonable. “Of course. Take your time—just not months and months, please.” He rose to his feet, tucking Lumpy the Second into the crook of his arm. He extended his hand, and she took it and squeezed it warmly between both of hers. “Take care, Elspeth.”

“Take care, Malcolm. You too, Bleats,” she said, patting Lumpy on his puffy head.

Malcolm walked to the doors and slid them apart.

“All right, I’ve thought on it,” Elspeth said, and Malcolm’s boots caught on the rug. “I’ll do it. I’ll be your wife. Make me the Lady of Reedholm.”

“I was so hoping you’d say that.” His cheeks filled with his smile. “But what if you meet your own mate one day?”

Elspeth laughed raucously and Malcolm shifted in closer, eager to be let in on the joke. “If I ever fall in love, I’ll just have you declared dead. Turn myself legally into a widow.”

“Perfect,” Malcolm said, returning her grin with one of his own. “I’ve already sent Margot a warning that should you agree, you might not want to let your newly blessed marriage bed go completely to waste.”

“Oh? Well, yes, someone should consummate with the bride, shouldn’t they?” Mischief lit her eyes. “And what did Miss Margot say in response to all of your scheming?”

“If you said yes, she plans to attend the ceremony. *And* bring friends.”

“Brilliant woman, she is,” Elspeth breathed, and Malcolm had to agree.

Epilogue



Malcolm

Malcolm married Elspeth in the Seelie fashion to honor his mother, under a willow tree outside Reedholm manor, standing hand in hand. The ceremony was short. A mage spoke the blessing. A magistrate had them sign a document. Hrafn added her signature as a witness. Margot, and her many attractive friends, signed their names as well.

Elspeth didn't bring her family. She made the decision that it was best to inform them of all the madness *after* the fact, when there was nothing they could do to talk her out of it or slow the plan down. Malcolm agreed.

When they were pronounced husband and wife, Malcolm touched his brow to the new marchioness, showing his great affection for her. Hrafn watched on, Solis beside her, holding her hand.

"Take care, my dear friend," Malcolm told his bride. He and Hrafn had already packed. Dressed lightly in leathers and fitted with a bag of essentials, they planned to leave immediately accompanied by two nearly full-grown shadow babies and a demon hawk. By letter, the villager, Lindiwe, had provided Hrafn with a list of her family members who lived outside the Faelands. They were the first of the Manna-heim Hrafn intended to visit.

“Come and see me at least once before the end of time,” Elspeth told him.

“We will,” Malcolm vowed.

* * *

They had one brief stop left before they paved their way south to sleep under the stars, hunt and forage for their food, battle any dangers that got in their way, and stir up dangers when there weren't any to entertain them.

Malcolm took his true mate to supper that evening at the home of the King of Night. Hrafn wanted to meet the legendary warrior queen she'd heard so much about, and though he was eager to chase adventures with her, he could deny his mate nothing.

They feasted in a grand dining hall with arched ceilings and glistening hardwood floors, an impossibly long dinner table between them. The meal was an intimate affair with no other guests. Rain of House Night, a Seelie witch and a bloody queen, sat at the end of the table across from Hrafn. Their physical differences were stark. Rain's hair was as white as Malcolm's, her face heart-shaped. Hrafn's braids were long and black. The queen's skin was pale where Hrafn was bronze.

They exchanged war stories while their demon familiars played a trickster game together. Beside the table, Ezra transformed into a panther. The demon cat shifted into the same form then broke into a black mist and shifted into a spider. Ezra followed suit before picking the next shape, a coal-colored wolf. They played this game until the room reeked of sulfur and their witches begged them to stop, worried they'd spoil everyone's appetite.

The marquess and his king claimed the opposite end of the table. After they'd finished the first course, Malcolm removed a small box from his pocket and set it beside Night's plate.

The fairy child, Clapa, played in Night's antlers, swinging and giggling. Lumpy and Ember were all that remained of the shadow babies. After blending with the others, they'd grown to be about the size of a small dog. They rolled around Malcolm's chair, playing a game of chase.

"What's in the box?" Night asked.

Malcolm motioned to have his wine glass refilled. A footman was quick to oblige him. "That's a piece of god soul and all that's left of the monster you ordered me to end. You're the better person to keep that safe than I. I'll be on the move, and I don't want it falling into the wrong hands."

The box opened with a creak, revealing the shiny tear-shaped drop of soul that glittered like a crystal. Night examined it, hovering in close.

"Oooo," Clapa purred. "Shine-shiny!" She dove for the dazzling treat, snatching it from the box before the king could close it.

"Clapa, no!" Night spoke too late.

The little fairy opened her mouth wide and swallowed the piece of soul whole. A lump slid down her tiny throat. She belched when she was finished. "Secuzzy," she said apologetically, smiling her brightest and sharpest shark smile.

Malcolm watched wide-eyed as the little fairy fluttered from the room, joining the shadow toddlers in a game of chase.

"Gods," he said. "How worried should we be right now, do you think?"

Night's jaw had gone slack. "I . . . I have no idea . . . She's sweet and she loves us like family, but . . ."

“She’s powerful and bloody violent,” Malcolm added.

“True. There’s a lot of that around here, though,” Night said fondly, jutting his gray chin toward his wife.

They laughed off their worries and enjoyed the second course—roast lamb, baked vegetables, and boiled eggs. Malcolm finished another glass of wine while Night tended to his tea.

“I’ve been looking at our lovely mates all evening, Lord King,” he said out of the side of his mouth, his unsteady gaze focused on the warrior women. “Now I’m wondering if you’re thinking what I’ve been thinking. Or have I simply had too much wine?”

“You’ve probably had too much wine.” Night lifted his tea to his lips and sipped, hiding his smile behind the ceramic. “But I may also be thinking the same thing.”

“It’s an extremely compelling thought. You have to admit.”

“Yes,” Night drawled, “compelling.”

“*Extremely* compelling,” Malcolm stressed.

The king waved his words away. “Yes, yes.”

The marquess scratched at the grizzled scruff on his chin. He pulled off a piece of roasted lamb from his cooling plate and chewed on it a while. “I would enjoy watching it play out.”

“If you’re wondering which of our women would best the other in combat, the answer is painfully obvious.” The steam from Night’s cup made his face look foggy—or possibly it was the effect of too much wine.

“Of course,” Malcolm said, nodding. “Hrafn is Vanir. Your bride, no matter how bloody, doesn’t stand a chance.”

“Ha,” Night scoffed. “My queen is unmatched.”

Malcolm shrugged. “But she’s so short and tiny.”

“So’s yours,” Night shot back. “Rain would have no trouble bringing *you* down.”

“No one’s denying that. It’s my mate who could best her. Hrafn has an aerial advantage.”

Night waved his arm like it was a weathered appendage. “Wings are like giant vulnerable points, begging to be slashed. Nothing a dagger couldn’t take care of. Especially one of Rain’s nasty living blades.”

Malcolm reached for his wine glass, realized it was empty, and pouted at it. “There’s only one way to settle this.”

“Don’t be daft.” The corners of the king’s silver eyes crinkled. “They’re both ancient and powerful. If the two of them fight, they could destroy my entire house. You’ll just have to accept that your queen is superior in every way to—”

“I have an idea,” Malcolm said eagerly.

“Perhaps you should have some coffee first before you enact it, hm?” Night said. “I have a feeling I’m not going to like this idea.”

As though she sensed they were discussing her, Rain turned to look at them. With a taunting smirk, Malcolm shoved Night out of his chair, sending the cup in his hands flying. Tea soaked the front of his brocade jacket. The ceramic chipped against the hardwood floors.

Rain’s amber eyes burned, and her nostrils flared. She stood, hands forming fists at her side. Hrafn shot to her feet, and the two warriors stared each other down.

“It’s working,” Malcolm said gleefully.

“You’re a fucking idiot.” Night sat up, grabbed a cloth napkin off the table, and dabbed at the tea on his chest.

“You mean if they fight, you won’t watch?”

“Of course I’ll watch.” His grin tugged on the scarred skin at his lip. “You’re still an idiot.”

Not wanting to miss a thing, Malcolm shushed him. Night made a rude gesture at him with his fingers.

“I’ve warned the marquess before about disrespecting his king,” Rain said, her measured words carrying across the hall.

Hrafn’s wings pulled up in a threatening arch, but then they lowered. “I see. It’s the Vanir in him. Fighting is affection to us.” She looked at Malcolm, and her lips twitched. “No blood. No broken bones,” she insisted.

Rain chewed her cheek a moment. “I can live with that.”

The queen charged at Malcolm. Night’s laughter filled the hall. Malcolm cursed. This wasn’t at all going the way he had planned, but he grinned at Rain anyway, amused in spite of himself.

Moments before the queen could launch herself at the Mad Marquess, Hrafn intervened. She flew in, wings beating at the air, sending a gust over the food, knocking down glasses and overturning the floral centerpiece, rattling flatware. She caught Rain’s slender shoulder and squeezed, stopping her just before she reached the table.

“I tried, my queen,” Hrafn said frowning, fingers digging farther into Rain’s cloak. “But I can’t let you hit my mate even though he’s begging for it.”

“That’s my girl,” Malcolm cooed.

Rain squared up to face the winged warrior woman. It would be the match that mastered all others, Malcolm was sure, and his pulse surged. Gods, he’d definitely had too much to drink. His limbs were full of warmth, and his head felt light.

“Hang it all,” Night mumbled under his breath, climbing quickly into his seat and leaning forward. “It’s really happening.”

Feathers ruffled, Hrafn glanced at Malcolm, who couldn’t stop himself from simpering. “I could hurt him in your stead,” she said to the queen.

“Well, damn,” Malcolm grumbled.

Rain considered her, head cocked. She nodded. “That’ll do nicely, I think.”

“Sidhek,” Malcolm cursed. His mate was right, it felt better in Olden.

Hrafn jetted forward and hit him with a closed fist. Her knuckles connected with his cheek, hard enough he was thrown out of his chair. He landed on his back, the king’s raucous laughter echoing in his ears.

As he lay there, three thoughts occurred to him all at once: He was completely in love, he’d never been happier, and he was grateful his nose wasn’t broken.

The End

* * *

Don’t miss the final book in the Fae Tricksters series, [*Dance with the Dragon Duke*](#).